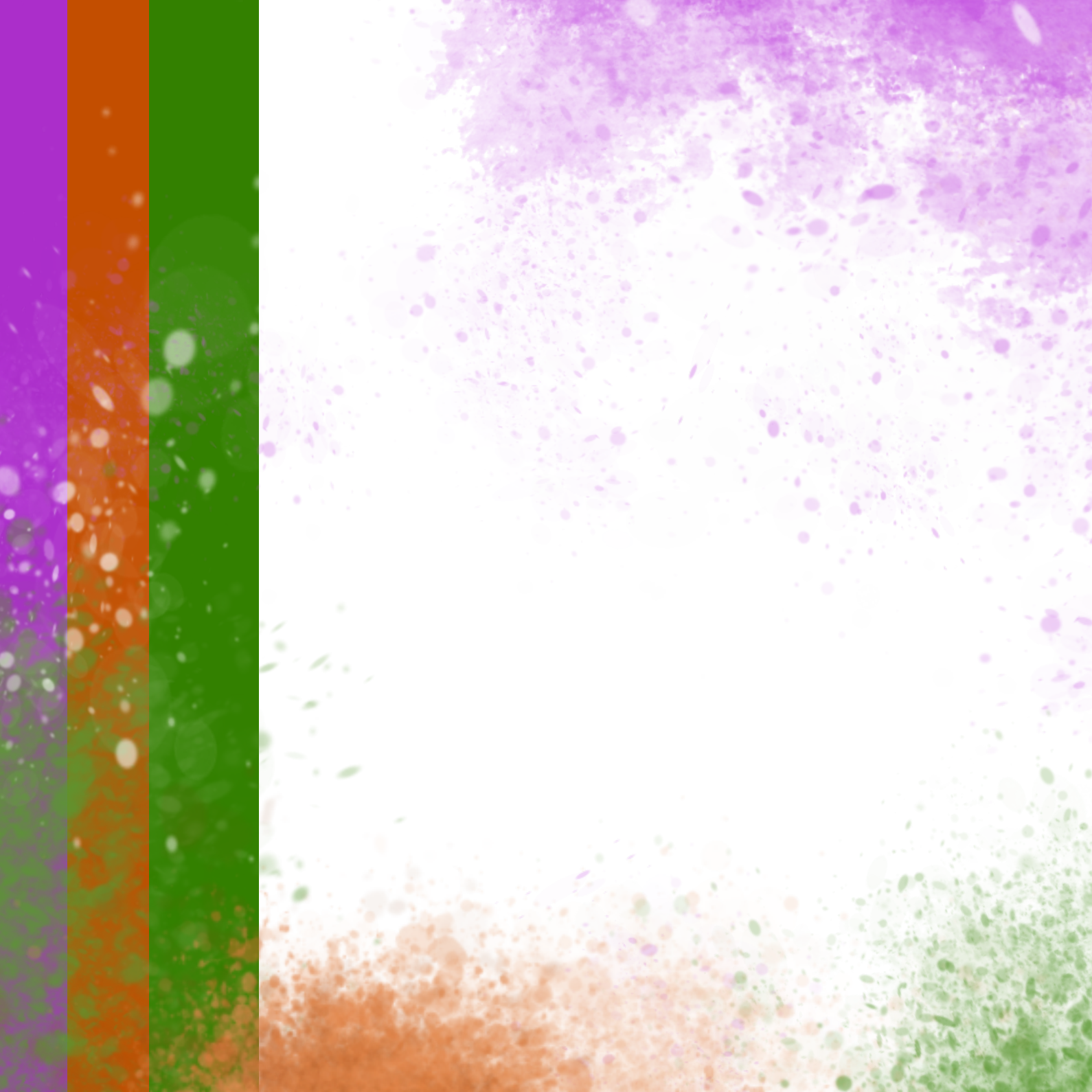
Radical Democracy

recovering the roots
of self-governance &
autonomy



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Radical Democracy

recovering the roots of self-governance & autonomy

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Preface

In the face of escalating crises—climate collapse, widening economic inequities, and the entrenched power of neoliberal states—the quest for radical democracy and autonomy has never been more urgent. It is in this convulsing global terrain that the Global Tapestry of Alternatives (GTA) emerged in 2019, as a network of grassroots groups, social movements, and communities (especially in the Global South) working together to imagine, enact, and defend alternatives to the dominant political-economic order. Through its horizontal structure, knowledge-sharing practices, and emphasis on ecological sustainability, economic democracy, indigenous rights, and participatory governance, GTA offers an evolving guide for those seeking paths beyond extraction, oppression, and hierarchy.

This compilation gathers stories of radical democracy and autonomy precisely to contribute to that lifeline. The essays and narratives collected here are not abstract theorizing—they are grounded experiments and lived realities: communities practicing self-governance; indigenous collectives reclaiming land, culture, and decision-making; solidarities forged across borders resisting extractivism and marginalization. Each story reflects one of the core objectives of the GTA: networking and solidarity; knowledge sharing; amplifying alternative models; and fostering systemic transformation. By drawing these diverse threads into dialogue, this book aims to strengthen the tapestry, offering both inspiration and critical reflection for practitioners, activists, scholars, and anyone yearning to reimagine democracy not merely as a form of government but as a lived, relational, morally grounded process of autonomy.

As you turn these pages, you will sense a common insistence: that autonomy is inseparable from democratic participation, that radical democracy demands more than procedural reform—it demands transformation in how power, resources, and decision-making are organized. These stories, spanning different geographies, cultures, and challenges, together affirm the vitality and multiplicity of alternative futures already in motion. May this collection serve as a bridge —across continents, across movements, across knowledges—within the GTA, both to honour what has been achieved and to stir what remains possible.

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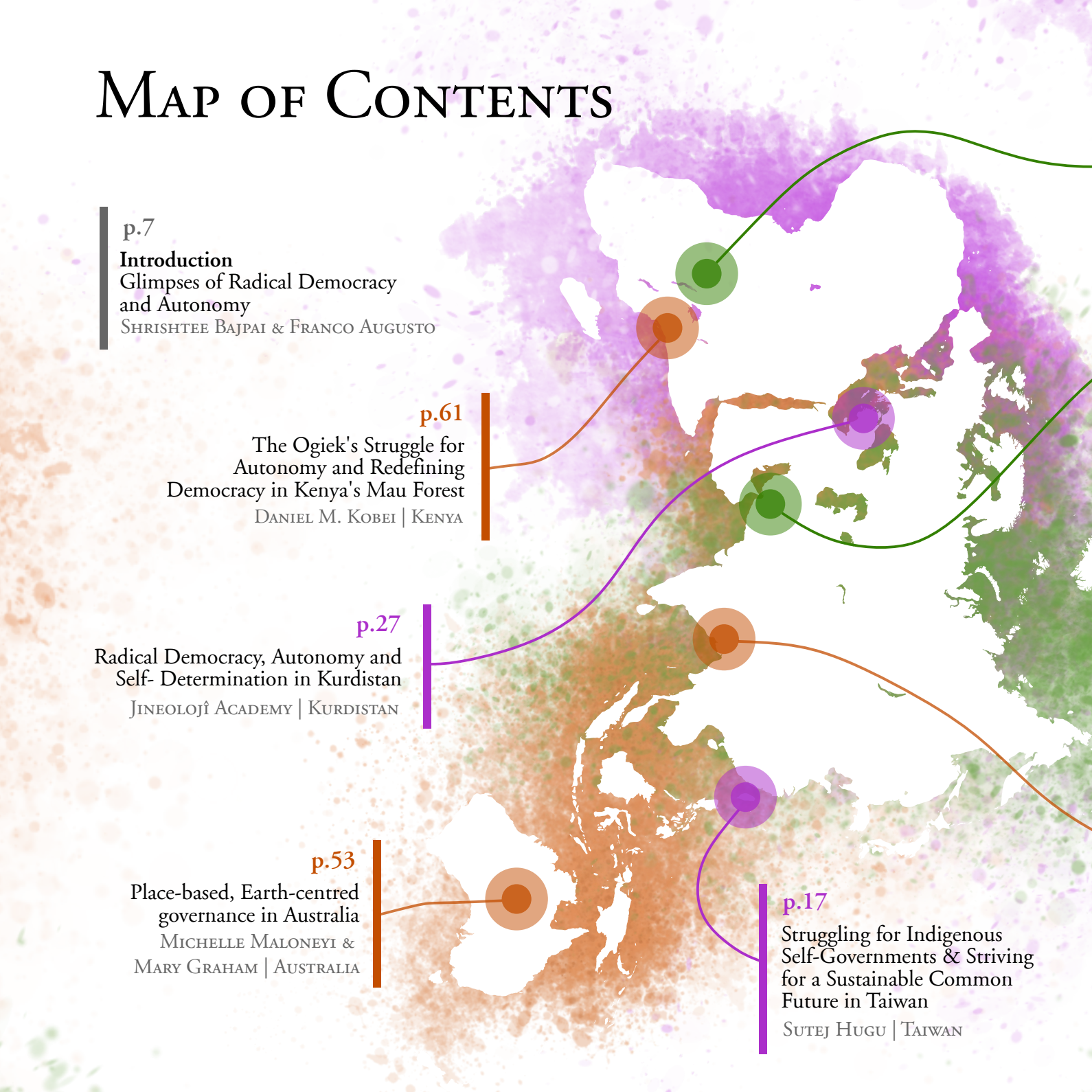

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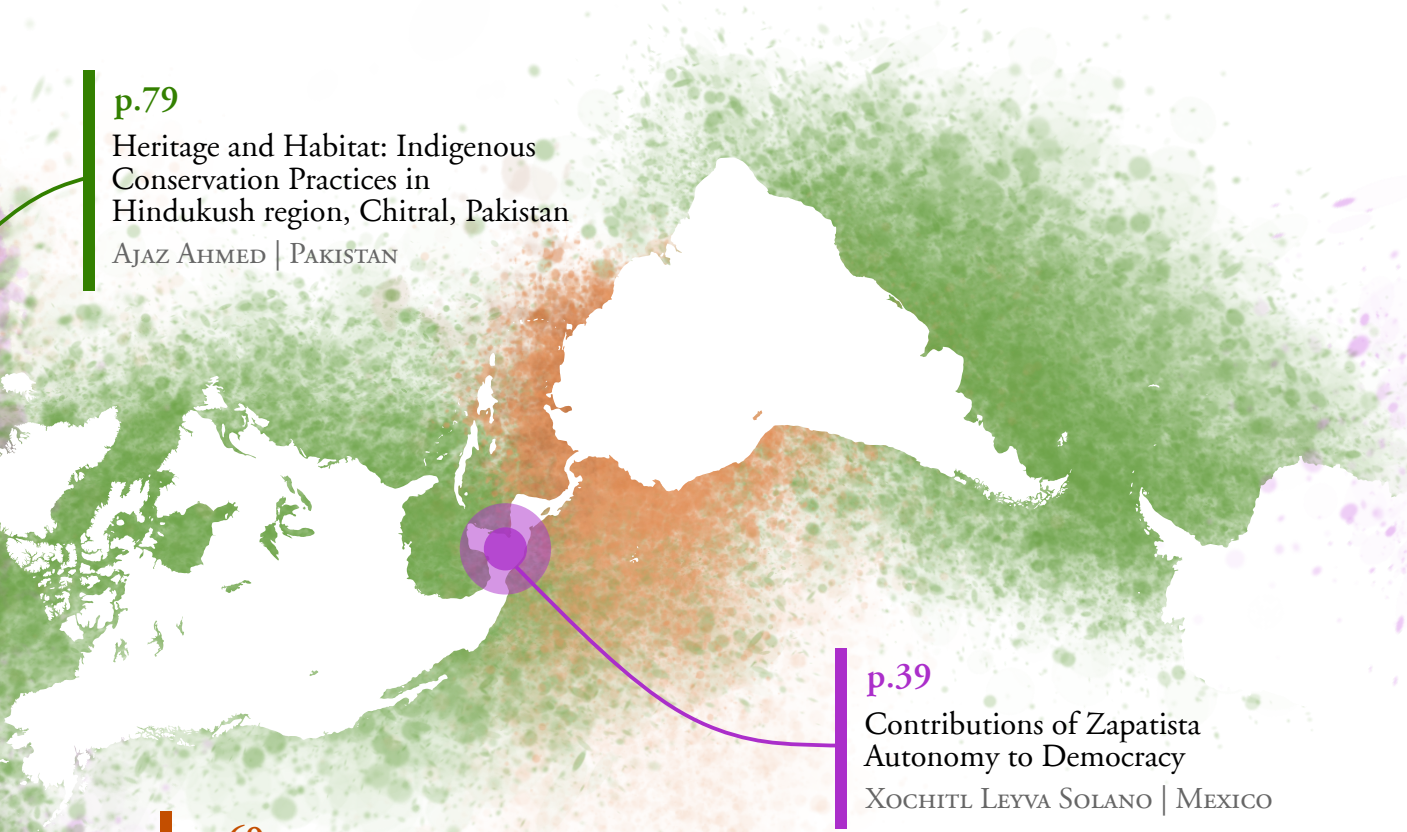
Visit our digital interactive and collaborative map on Radical Democracy, with these and more contents:
https://evo.re/rdmap



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INTRODUCTION

Glimpses of Radical Democracy and Autonomy

Shrishtee Bajpai & Franco Augusto

It is becoming increasingly obvious the urgency to think and act about the problems of the climate/ecological crisis, wars, social justice and borders from an integral approach. Environmental breakdown displaces millions of people every year, while states respond by militarising their borders, causing further suffering and death. Historically, the Nation-State model was born out of a logic that also saw nature – and colonised peoples – as things to be conquered, dominated and exploited[1]. This was supported by an ideology asserting that capitalist and extractive modernity is the only way to organise lives, that a centralised government was the only way to reach 'welfare' to the 'masses', and that this justifies taking over territories of Indigenous peoples and local communities for national goals like 'development' and security. It's symbols such as one flag, one language and a single identity submerge and often disrespect diverse biocultures – combined biological and cultural human environments[2].

We must see the nation-state, capitalism and colonialism as going hand in hand. Unfortunately, the industrial model applied by the socialist experiments has also been as much extractive and had the same attitude towards nature – to be exploited for human welfare. In that regard, the developmentalist and industrial attitude in a hegemonic nation-state remains the same. The financialisation of nature is at the core of these processes. The role of representative democracy within the framework of the Nation-State, its crisis of legitimacy and the co-optation by the far right perspectives and increasing fascist tendencies is also evident in the recent times across the world[3].

However, grassroots people have been increasingly questioning whether sustainability, peace, justice can ever be achieved through the framework of nation-states. Communities across the world are has been practicing diverse forms of self-government, anarchisms[4], and autonomy along with the emerging frameworks of power for radical transformations[5].

There is a multiplicity of practices and experiences that embody these other forms of government where the meaning of the idea of "democracy" seems to re-emerge: the "power of the people." They are a return to the origin, to the very root of the question. In this sense, it is important to recover the concept of "radical democracy." This is not about attempts to fix representative democracy within the framework of "public policy" rhetoric. We are not talking here about concepts that have emerged within the institutional reformist framework, such as "participatory democracy". What ordinary people are bringing is ***real*** democracy.

We speak of "radical" democracy because its sense of strength escapes to a field of enunciation that is both precise and polysemic. The concept is not new, but it has fallen into disuse and its transformative capacity remains unexplored. Radical democracy is not a historically existing institution, but a historical project which can only exist as a never-ending horizon. It is not about "a government" but about governance. All the time, people learn from experience that true democracy depends on the places where people live and exercise their power. As said by Lummis, ***"...democracy doesn't mean putting power some place other than where the people are"***[6].

The years of conflict over borders that were drawn arbitrarily, show the limitations of Nation-State boundaries. The ethnic and natural boundaries have come to be more cogently recognised living in these borders and thus a desire to see beyond the international states paradigm. This is evident in the lives and politics of the border communities across the world. The people inhabiting the pluriverse

"...democracy doesn't mean putting power some place other than where the people are"

are turning to other ways of organising society based on Indigenous cosmovisions and practices that (re)integrates humans within nature.

To truly govern their own lives, grassroots peoples and grounded alternatives ways of living are creating political bodies through which power can be exercised, both in theory and in practice, by themselves, and not in the hands of elected or imposed leaders. In their new commons, they seek multiple ways of shared governance, where "democracy" is nothing more than common sense[7]. In that sense communities are challenging the capitalist and statist domination of lives, taking democracy to its basic root.

Through the series of reports on regenerative stories documents, we bring out the tensions and complementarities between local, national and global dimensions. To read through publication we invite the readers to have in mind the questions that shaped it. What are other ways to understand and practice democracy beyond the reduced perspective of liberal, representative and western models? How do communities action/work transform that into a different notion of power, e.g. 'power-with' or 'power-to'? And what does that then mean for democracy? What are the links between radical

democracy and economy? How do they interact with each other/linked and what's our collective envisioning on it? How do the notions of democracy exist beyond humans? How can we rethink democracy keeping the rest of nature (more than humans) in mind? What would a post-state society look like and the notion of withering away from the state just wishful thinking? What are the multiple practices susceptible to being framed under the idea of "radical democracy"?

In the different pieces coming from different communities across the world, the common thread running through is the impact of colonialism and imperialism that perpetuated violence over humans, cultures, lands, territories and the rest of nature.

In the first section of the publication we present a series of experiences struggling against and beyond state. Sutej Hugu from **Taiwan** explains in his contribution how having *"gone through the following four centuries of successive colonial regimes, communities lost integrity and sovereignty, lands and rights"*. Continued imposition of and centralisation of power in the hands of the nation-state was one of the bases of capitalism[8]: in practice, capitalism is carried out through the political, legal and military institutions of nation-states[9].

The **Kurdish movement** rooted in Democratic confederalism, a non-nationalist and social system adopting an ecological approach based on direct and participatory democracy, centred around the liberation of women from a millennia of enslavement in various forms of patriarchy and masculinity. According to Abdullah Öcalan, the ideologue of the movement, the state is a manifestation of patriarchy, hence true democratic liberation can only emerge if it is based on the/a 'science of women's freedom' called Jineolojî. The Kurdish movement illustrates a powerful example of nurturing radical democracy and a holistic system of democratic society organisation in four parts of Kurdistan as well as on the basis of cooperation with democratic anti-system groups in Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria. Rather than demanding something from states and dominant men or criticizing them, the Kurdish movement emphasizes the precious meaning of living self-determined and collectively. Autonomy and democracy is tied with a developing philosophy of life, for example for the Kurdish movement it is *Jin-Jiyan-Azadî (women, life and freedom)*, and to strengthen structures of women's autonomous self-governance, self-defence and self-sufficient economy.

In similar ways, the insurgent hope of **Zapatistas in Mexico** takes a radical shift by asserting that indigenous autonomy is rejecting the state and covers most aspects of life and is organized by areas of work that vary from community to community. These include women, health, education, government, justice, agroecology, agrarian affairs, collective work, care of Mother Earth, commerce, transportation, civil registry, arts (dances, theater, music, murals, handicrafts, paintings, sculptures, poetry), science and communication (radio, video, cinema). Autonomy must be exercised in everyday life.

In the second section, we present experiences about self-determination in relation with State governmental structures. Neo colonisation in the form of western legal systems, how nation states and bureaucracy still function continues to eradicate peoples systems of governance. However, radicalizing democracy does not necessarily mean rejecting the state altogether. In many situations, communities deepen democratic participation by negotiating with, challenging, and at times collaborating with state institutions. This reflects an understanding that the state—despite its colonial and exclusionary foundations—continues to be a key site of struggle over rights, sovereignty, and recognition. For marginalized groups, engaging with the state can create opportunities for legal gains, territorial defense, and the institutional validation of alternative governance systems. Yet such engagement is not a form of submission; it is often a strategic and tactical process that merges grassroots mobilization with efforts to transform structures from within. In this light, radical democracy is not merely an external project, but a relational one—constantly shaped through the interplay between community autonomy and the formal architectures of state power.

The **Aboriginals from Australia** speak of First Laws as the foundational laws and rules about how to live with and Care for Country (a community's land/traditional estate/bioregion). These First Laws emerged from the deep understanding that Aboriginal People developed about their Country – their unique ecosystems and local places – over millennia of observation, practice and spirituality.

Dongria Kondh wedding dance, Niyamgiri, Odisha, India
Source: Ashish Kothari

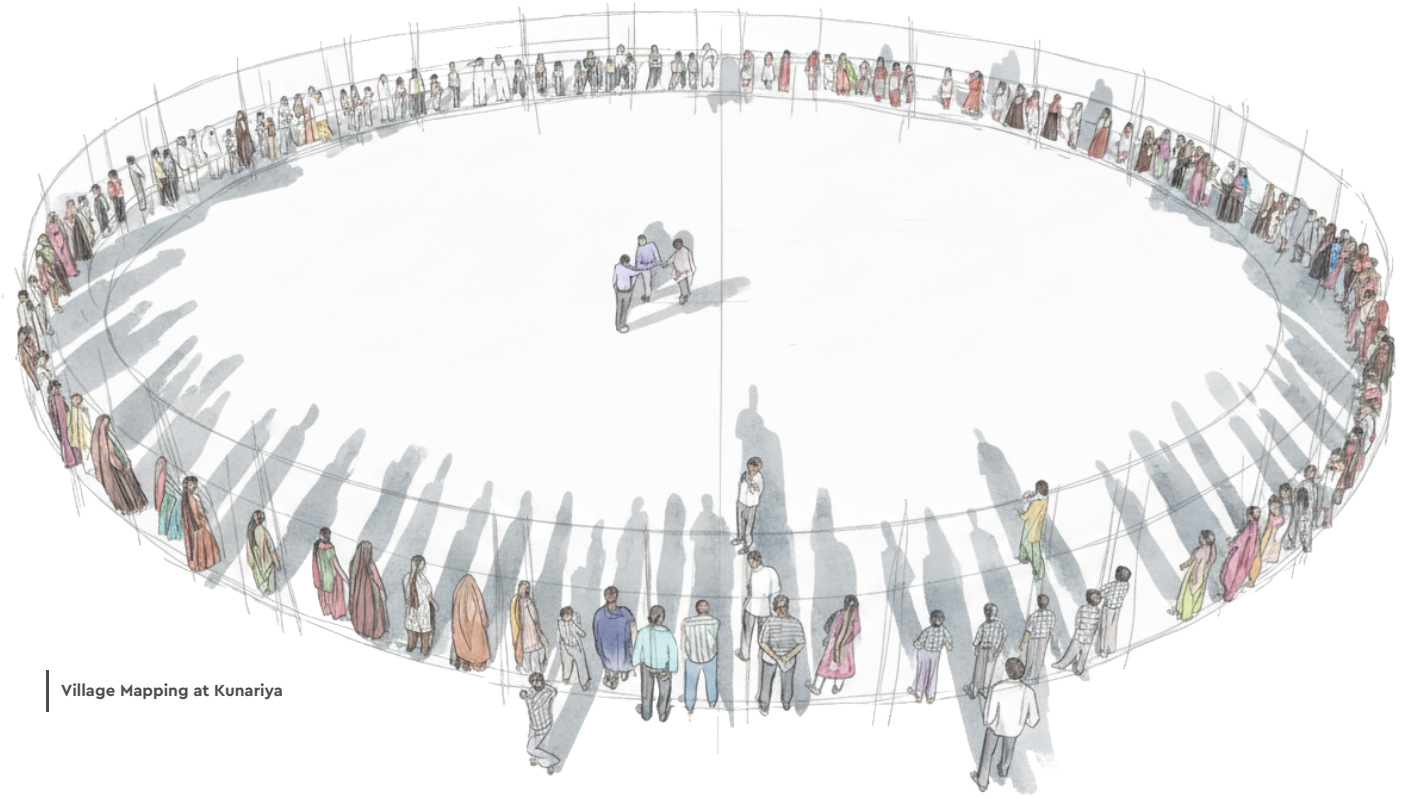
Second laws are the rules for living together with other human beings, which are guided by the template of First Laws. Speaking for these modern times towards the idea of Earth Governance, focus on understanding the foundations of their local ecosystems, catchments and bioregions first, then build an analysis of their current economic and social issues, so that systems change can be created that benefits and fits within their unique, specific ecological boundaries.

Continuation of neo-liberal growth and extractive model of development is very much part of this neo-colonising discourse, elaborates Paul Sein Twa, **Salween Peace Park**. There, the Karen community is challenging this reductionist, modernist perspective of the State and other forms of dominant governance institutions who work on the logic that humans are separate from rivers, mountains and forests, and individuals from the community. By operating on the principle of deliberative democracy, the Salween Peace Park (SPP), a Karen Indigenous-led culture and nature conservation area, operates under a popularly elected 137-member General Assembly, makes governance more transparent, directly accountable, and accessible, thus strengthening political engagement.

The **Ogiek people of Kenya** provide a powerful example of radical democracy enacted through engagement with state institutions. After generations of marginalization and land dispossession, the Ogiek appealed to the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights, which in 2017 affirmed their rights to ancestral territories and self-governance. This landmark decision demonstrates how Indigenous communities can leverage state and supra-state mechanisms to broaden the scope of democratic possibility. For the Ogiek, the struggle for land restitution extends beyond territorial recovery—it represents a reaffirmation of collective decision-making and ecological guardianship as vital democratic practices that the state must learn to recognize and accommodate.

In the third and final section of this publication, we explore the experiences of radical democracy that take place around conservation and recovery of traditional governance practices. From Indigenous peoples' struggle in Pakistan and Uganda we learn that Indigenous ecological wisdom of embeddedness and connectedness is cross-generations, inter-species and trans-boundaries. They illustrate a powerful example of conserving the animistic territories of life for all beings, celebrating the diversity of language, cultural and biological diversity, and embodying the embeddedness in the inter-species habitats. For several of these communities, autonomy is closely tied with promoting and restoring original labors and ceremonies following the seasons, traditional song-singing in community gathering and storytelling in each extended family (including the more than human world).

In many Indigenous and local traditions, governance emerges not from centralized authority but from the recognition of interdependence between people, ancestors, spirits, and ecosystems. The more-than-human plays a fundamental role in shaping political order, as rivers, mountains, and forests are often seen as subjects with agency rather than



Village Mapping at Kunariya

objects to be managed. This re-centering of democracy around ecological and spiritual relations opens a path to rethink politics as something grounded in reciprocity and care rather than domination and control.

The **Kalasha community of the Hindu Kush in Pakistan** exemplifies this rooted practice. Their governance is woven into rituals, myths, and collective assemblies that respect both human needs and ecological integrity. The Kalasha view forests, pastures, and rivers as sacred spaces, demanding protection rather than exploitation. Through community decision-making, they sustain a balance between survival and conservation, demonstrating that democracy becomes radical when it reclaims its original foundation: collective life in harmony with nature.

In Uganda, the Bagungu community has advanced a similar vision by linking political action to the rights of nature. Struggles over land, forests, and water have led to innovative forms of governance that recognize ecosystems as legal and moral entities. By framing rivers and landscapes as rights-bearing subjects, these communities expand the boundaries of democracy beyond human society, creating a legal-political framework where nature is a participant in governance. Their practices challenge the anthropocentric assumptions of odern law and offer an ecological radicalization of democracy.

Taken together, the Kalasha in Pakistan and the Bagungu in Uganda illustrate that the radicalization of democracy also comes from returning to its roots: the land, the sacred, and the recovery of grounded experiences. By re-centering politics on ecological interdependence and traditional forms of governance, these communities propose a vision of democracy that transcends the state and modern law. In doing so, they remind us that genuine democracy grows not in parliaments but in forests, rivers, and communal assemblies where human life is inseparable from the vitality of nature.

What is immensely powerful is that these communities weave together powerful examples of organizing from below offering visions of pluriversal radical democracies: where all people, rather than being under a political occupation of globalized, capitalist, hetero-patriarchal, liberal democracy, have the right to exist as they are, with their own ways of being, doing, and thinking. They also offer interesting lessons on transnational organizing while also thinking through power and alternatives.

The processes of radical democracy listed in this series argues for **a holistic approach to this concept that acknowledges and respects diverse forms of knowledge and plural forms of governance**. Many of these processes are calling for deeper international convergence of struggles that unite Indigenous Peoples, grassroots movements, and oppressed communities in the fight for justice and dignity.

As a response to this need, from the Global Tapestry of Alternatives, we organized a first global convergence in February 2025, which took place in South Africa. As a result of this effort, a new kind of internationalism seems to be emerging around Radical Democracy and Autonomy, initially expressed in the *"Declaration on Autonomy, Radical Democracy and Self Determination"*[10].

There is a need for a new form of internationalism where there is a collective rejection of the dominance of the nation-state framework, even if some continue to continue to work under and/or negotiate with it. In addition, there is collective insistence on biocultural regionalism, where political decision-making aligns with natural and cultural flows rather than artificial borders. A strong internationalism can only be developed if other models of international governance that operate in mutual recognition in, against, and beyond the nation-state, forging pathways toward a just and liberated future and a people's legitimation process can be advocated for. This would need relationality and interconnectedness of all things as a fundamental to work towards mutual recognition of these systems by communities, social movements and networks who believe in the power, autonomy and interspecies justice ■

Notes

[1] Bookchin, M (1982a). The Ecology of Freedom. Palo Alto: Cheshire Books. Available at: https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/murray-bookchin-the-ecology-of-freedom

[2] Bajpai, S. & Kothari, A. & Crespo, J. (2022). Nation-states are destroying the world. Could 'bioregions' be the answer?Available at: https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/oureconomy/nation-states-are-destroying-the-world-could-bioregions-be-the-answer/

[3] Kothari, A (2020). The problem and promise of democracy. Available at: https://ashishkothari.in/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/The-problem-and-promise-of-democracy-Wall-Street-International-Magazine-13.11.2020.pdf

[4] Scott, J. C. (2012). Two Cheers for Anarchism: Six Easy Pieces on Autonomy, Dignity, and Meaningful Work and Play (STU-Student edition). Princeton University Press. Available at: http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.cttq95jt

[5] Temper, L. & Walter, M. & Rodríguez, I. & Kothari, A. & Turhan, E.. (2018). A perspective on radical transformations to sustainability: resistances, movements and alternatives. Sustainability Science.

[6] Lummis, C. (1997). Radical Democracy. Cornell University Press.

[7] Esteva, G. & Prakash, M. (2014). Grassroots Postmodernism: Remaking the Soil of Cultures. Zed Books.

[8] Öcalan, A. (2016). Democratic Nation. Available at: https://ocalanbooks.com/downloads/democratic-nation.pdf

[9] Bajpai, S. & Kothari, A. & Crespo, J. (n2)

[10] Declaration on Autonomy, Radical Democracy and Self Determination (2025). Available at: https://globaltapestryofalternatives.org/events:radasd:declaration

Radical democracy emerges as a practice that seeks to deepen political participation beyond the representative structures of the nation-state. It does not simply demand inclusion within existing institutions, but rather questions the legitimacy of centralized forms of sovereignty and authority. In this sense, radical democracy opens space for collective self-determination, plural voices, and horizontal decision-making. Its power lies in the capacity to confront the rigid frameworks of the modern state, creating alternative forms of governance that embody autonomy and solidarity.

Indigenous groups in Taiwan exemplify the dynamics of autonomy and radical democracy. Facing centuries of assimilationist policies by both colonial powers and the modern Taiwanese state, many Indigenous peoples have revitalized their own decision-making structures rooted in traditional councils and communal stewardship of land. By reclaiming sovereignty over territories, cultural practices, and political organization, these communities show how radical democracy is not only a rejection of the nation-state, but also a re-affirmation of ancestral ways of living together, in which politics is inseparable from land, identity, and collective memory.

The Kurdish movement known for the Rojava-Revolution has also articulated a democratic confederalism that explicitly rejects the nation-state as the ultimate form of political organization. Inspired by the

Against & Beyond the State

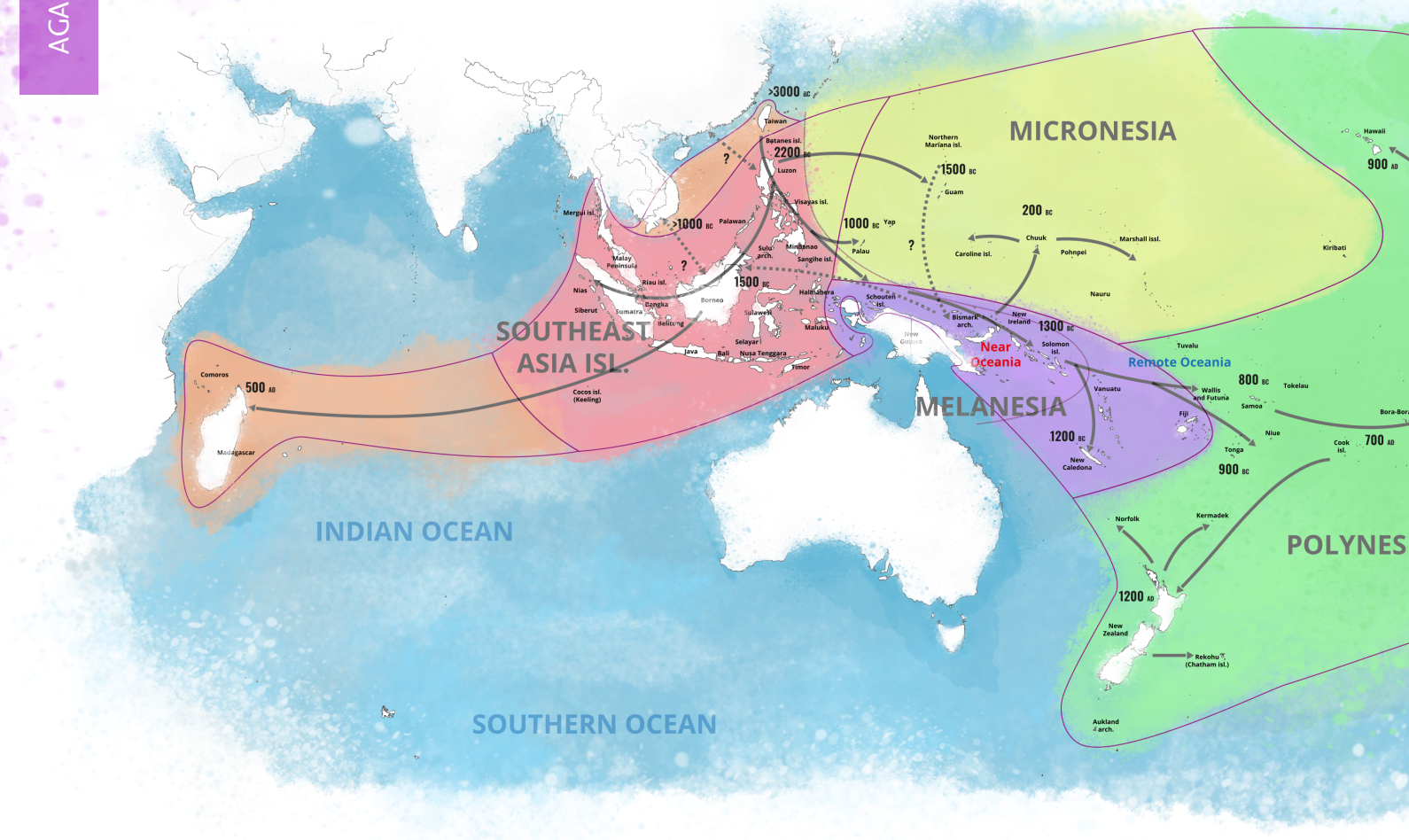
ideas of Abdullah Öcalan, Kurdish communities have built councils, communes, and cooperatives that embody gender equality, ecological awareness, and pluralistic participation. These institutions directly confront the centralizing tendencies of state power in the Middle East, while demonstrating the potential of radical democracy to weave together diverse ethnic and religious groups in shared self-governance.

The Zapatista movement in Chiapas, Mexico, provides another powerful example of radical democratic practice in action. Since the 1994 uprising, Zapatista communities have organized themselves through assemblies, rotating leadership, and collective decision-making, rejecting the centralized state's authority. Their autonomous municipalities represent a living experiment in self-rule, where health, education, and justice are managed collectively by the people themselves. This defiance of the Mexican nation-state demonstrates how radical democracy can coexist with, and challenge, dominant structures of power, offering new possibilities for grassroots sovereignty.

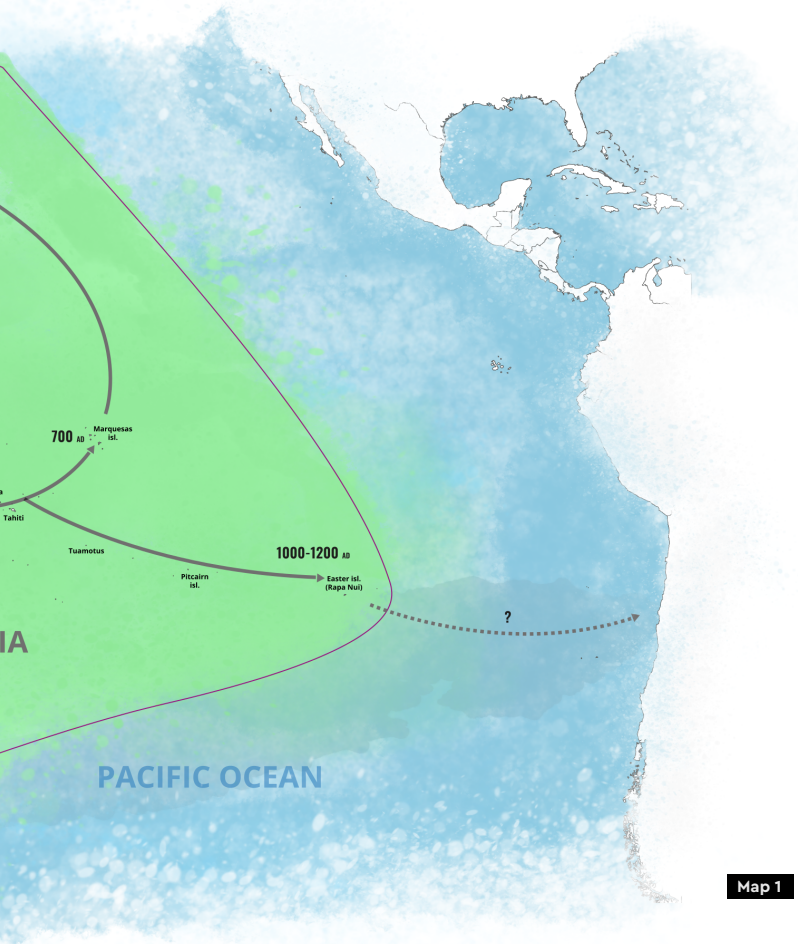
Taken together, these experiences illustrate how radical democracy thrives at the margins of the nation-state, confronting its limits and proposing alternative forms of sovereignty. The Indigenous peoples of Taiwan, the Kurdish movement, and the Zapatistas demonstrate that radical democracy is not a utopian abstraction, but a practical and embodied process of self-rule. Their experiments reveal a powerful truth: democracy becomes radical not when it perfects the state, but when it transcends it, allowing communities to create new political worlds grounded in autonomy, dignity, and solidarity.

Sutej Hugu

Indigenous Taiwan Self-Determination Alliance (ITWSDA)



Struggling for Indigenous Self-Governments & Striving for a Sustainable Common Future in Taiwan



Map 1

"no si mavey tao am, meyta"

(If we are still alive, then let's go!)

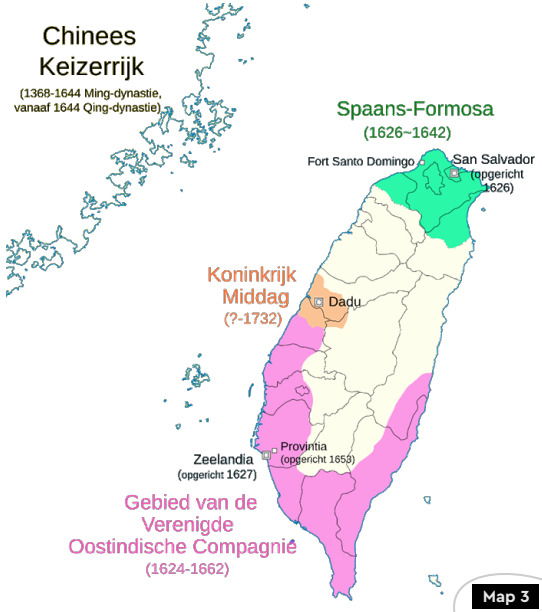
– a Tao old saying

This is a diaspora map about the Austronesian language family which originated from Taiwan five thousand years ago. It spans from the Indian Ocean the Madagascar to the Pacific the Rapa Nui, being one of the largest language families in the world, comprising more than 1,200 languages.

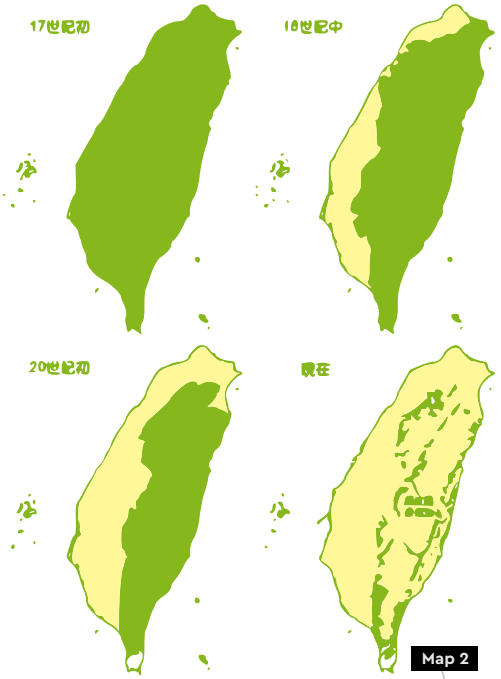
The Formosan languages in Taiwan have the highest language diversity in Austronesia with up to twenty ethnic language groups recognized by the linguists (see Map 4). They are Indigenous peoples of plains and wetlands, forests and mountains, coast and islands. There are still 43 Austronesian dialects spoken by the 16 officially recognized ethnic groups in Taiwan today representing a rich heritage of language and cultural diversity.

Historical context and current situation

Indigenous Peoples in the Island of Taiwan kept intact until the early 17th century when the Dutch East India Company arrived 1624 to occupy the southern part of it as a base for trading in East Asia four hundred years ago (see Map 3). Gone through the following four centuries of successive colonial regimes, we lost the integrity of our sovereignty, lands and rights. Colonial governance and modern infrastructure brought us the total collapse of tribal institutions along with our marginalized languages and cultures.



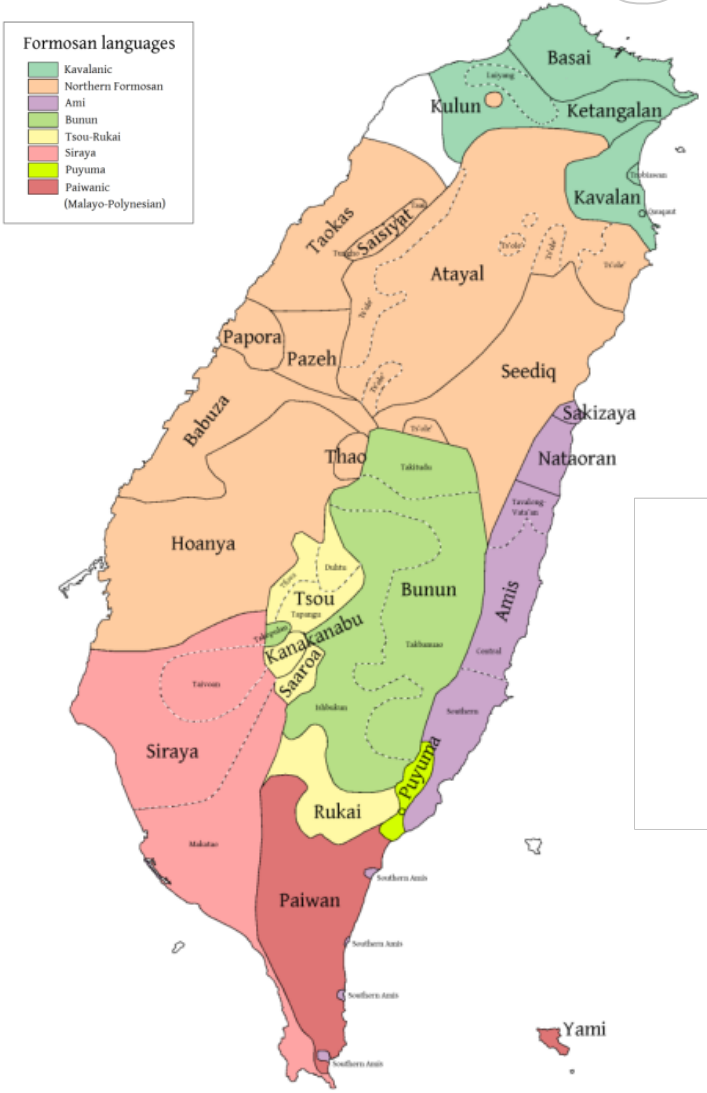
Map 3



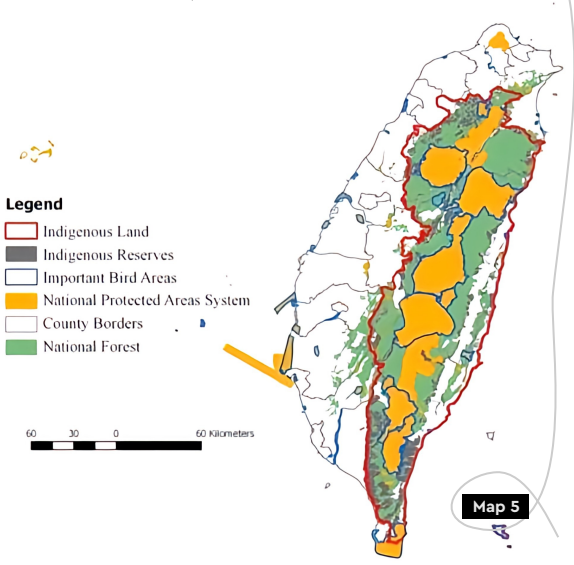
Map 2

Map 2 shows how the Indigenous peoples lost their territories within three hundred more years. Indigenous Taiwan was intact in the beginning of the 17th Century before the Dutch arrived. In the mid-18th Century, one third of plain areas on the west coast were already occupied by the Chinese immigrant farmers. After the cession of Taiwan to Japan in 1895, Indigenous peoples still have de facto governance of more than half of Taiwan in the beginning of the 20th Century. In 1928, the Japanese colonial government launched the total grabbing of the Indigenous peoples' territories along with the implementation of national forest and the fragmented Indigenous peoples' reserves in the 1930s. This colonial ruling framework has continued with little change till today.

Map 4



Map 5 was made for the IUCN guidelines on the *"Governance of Protected Areas: from understanding to action"* published 2013. It well depicts the total overlapping of the national protected areas system and national forest with the inherent conserved territories of life by Indigenous peoples in Taiwan. There exists the critical potential of an alternative conservation governance and management by the Indigenous knowledge and institutions.



Map 5

Indigenous persistent resistance and colonial reluctant responses

Coming to the contemporary history of Taiwan post-World War II, from the 'Free China' propaganda during the Chiang Kai-shek dictatorship era, under martial law for 38 years till 1987, to the 'Democratic Taiwan' after Lee Teng-hui, the first Taiwan President by general election in 1996 and on the position to 2000, the settler colonial ruling oppression on the Indigenous peoples has never been lifted. Now, even following the formal apology to Indigenous peoples on behalf of the government in 2016 and setting up the Indigenous Historical Justice and Transitional Justice Committee under the Presidential Office in 2017 by President Tsai Ying-Wen, the first woman to hold that position, it's sharply ironical and sad to learn that real transformation and change are yet to happen.

Within this period, we observed the persistent resistance of Indigenous peoples in Taiwan and the hesitant responses from the colonial regimes. After lifting of the martial law in 1987, there are some milestones of Indigenous peoples' movement in Taiwan:

- Recognition of Indigenous peoples in the constitution amendment in 1997.

- "A New Partnership Between the Indigenous Peoples and the Government of Taiwan" was signed by representatives of Indigenous Peoples in 1999 with the DPP candidate for President Mr. Chen Sui-bian, and reconfirmed in 2002 after he won the position.

This document is a real breakthrough of our movement on claiming the following critical key points

:

1. Recognizing the inherent sovereignty of Taiwan's Indigenous Peoples

2. Promoting autonomy for Indigenous Peoples

3. Concluding a land treaty with Taiwan's Indigenous Peoples

4. Reinstating traditional names of Indigenous communities and natural landmarks

5. Recovering traditional territories of Indigenous communities and Peoples

6. Recovering use of traditional natural resources and furthering the development of self-determination

7. Providing legislative (parliamentary) representation for each Indigenous People

In President Chen's second term, the Legislation Yuan approved the "Basic law for Indigenous peoples" in 2005, which was basically following the earlier draft version of UNDRIP in advance of its approval and announcement by the UN General Assembly in 2007. To implement it, we know that dozens of earlier laws in conflict must be revised and new laws need to be devised. Little progress in the last two decades about this barrier of legislation.

An Act to Implement the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights was announced in 2009 under the KMT President Ma Ying-jiu. Despite article 1 on the right to self- determination for all peoples in both covenants, the status of Indigenous peoples as 'peoples' is yet to be recognized and respected.

When DPP won the Presidential election again in 2016, we got a formal apology to Indigenous peoples from the new President Ms. Tsai Ing-wen, and an Indigenous Historical Justice and Transitional Justice Committee, comprising of five thematic commissions on land, history, language, culture and conciliation issues, under the presidential office in 2017. That's such a pity that it dissolved after the end of her second term in May 2024 without releasing the truth report or any further arrangement for implementing the transitional justice.

Critical challenge and flexible Strategy

From the experience of the last forty years, we observed a rough rule of activists' power dynamics that almost every immaterial response and deceptive promise from the colonial regime caused the loss of more than half of our strength at the time, being dissolved capacities.

However, we've tried to renegotiate for dismantling the settler colonialism over the Indigenous peoples, through recognizing inherent sovereignty, returning traditional territories, compensating for persecution and collaborating in restoration (showed in the slogans on the picture below by the Taromak self-declaration).

That would be the only way to release this country from the long entangled oppressive tensions and seriously distorted humanity among the colonizers and the colonized. Guided by the Taiwan Indigenous Conserved Territories Union (TICTU), it is starting from the self-declaration of traditional territories by the Taromak tribal community (Drekay people) in 2016, including mutual recognition and negotiation on overlapping and shared governance among neighboring tribal communities: Katratripulr, Kasavakan (Pinuyumayan people) and Valangaw (Amis people).

In total, about eight tribal communities have successfully done it, followed by a full declaration of the traditional territories of 96 thousand hectares by the Drekay people and the establishment of the Drekay people's Confederacy Council (Kadaenganeta ka Ngungadrekai) in 2017. It's a great achievement gone through three preparatory meetings by traditional leaders, contemporary elites and youth groups along with a thorough consensus building process in each of the sixteen tribal communities.

Alishan Forest view in Nepal

Indigenous Taiwan Self-determination Alliance was initiated in 2019 by both senior and seasoned activists as well as younger generation radicals in the deep valley of our movement.

Indigenous Taiwan Self-determination Alliance was initiated in 2019 by both senior and seasoned activists as well as younger generation radicals in the deep valley of our movement. Collectively reflecting and reorienting the current crises that our communities are facing by being embedded in modern industrial societies and consumerist culture which is resulting in loss of our languages, cultures and institutions of self-governance and in turn territories of life. Thinking thoroughly about the common future of a sustainable self-determined Taiwan, we launched the visionary joint action of "liberating the colonial relationship between the colonized and the colonizer, and initiating an inclusive new nation-building by all ethnic groups and social classes". This is based on the Indigenous ecological wisdom of embeddedness and connectedness that's cross-generations, inter-species and trans-boundaries, to heal the world trauma of colonization and exploitation that have caused pervasive insanity, malfunction and anomaly besides corruption and destruction on the Earth everywhere. Let's strive to conserve the animistic territories of life for all beings, adhere to the ultimate value of the trinity of language, cultural and biological diversity, and create a new model of planet governance together.

Through the important recent evolution by the implementation of mutual recognition among those independent ethnic group confederacy councils, the Taiwan Indigenous Sovereignty Confederacy Alliance (TISCA) is emerging. There

is now the Kavulungan Treaty Alliance (Pinuyumayan, Drekay, and Paiwan); the Usaviah/Tongku Saveq Treaty Alliance (Bunun, Cou, Thao, Kanakanavu, and Hla'alua); the Papa-Waqa Treaty Alliance (Atayal, Saisiyat); the Klbiyun Treaty Alliance (Seediq, Truku), the Pacific Coast Treaty Alliance (Amis/Pangcah, Kebalan, Sakizaya); and the Pongso no Tao & Batanes Islanders Alliance (transboundary between Taiwan and Philippine).

While the ITWSDA is working through an Inclusive New Nation-Building Liaison Office to promote the solidarity exchange & coordination among Indigenous peoples and tribal communities; consensus communication channels between the marginal Indigenous communities and the dominant settler society; Integrating the urban Indigenous population, younger educated elites and their original tribal communities; connecting up with the foreign laborers and new immigrants from Southeast Asia; and dialogue and mutual learning with the Indigenous peoples' movement as well as the radical alternative initiatives around the world.

Be visionary and realistic at the same time

There are currently three major sites and bases of ongoing resistance and restoration from the Indigenous Taiwan custodian communities of territories of life in their ancestral domains. Namasia Tribal Hunters' Association of Bunun and Kanakanavu peoples, in Namasia district Kaohsiung, works on self-management of traditional hunting ground and non-timber forest products cooperative. With steady and persistent strategic campaign and negotiation, we are reviving the land ethic of Indigenous hunters and restoring the permanent sovereignty over natural resources on rivers and forests in our traditional territories, step-by-step implementing our autonomy arrangement. Now a community Cooperative is set up along with the Association for eco-tourism with long-term ecological monitoring of the inter-species habitats, for an agroforestry project on cultivating the endemic wild tea trees, and for local forest management works supporting by Forestry and Nature Conservation Agency.

The collective mapping is a common practice among the communities.

Katratripulr Tribal Council, of Pinuyumayan people, supporting the traditional leadership of three joint family Rahans who are the chosen channeling persons to their ancestral spirits, works on building the modern self-government institution from the traditional age groups of boys and men as well as women's association and community development association, and continuing the eco-occupation of the Kanaluvang wetland, an important bird area, where they have struggled to save it from a big development project of a 161 hectares 202 MW solar power farm invested by a transnational corporation and won a High Administrative Court lawsuit against the Ministry of Economic Affairs in 2022. Now it is uses as a common land for traditional millet planting and a trial site for Indigenous ecological natural farming. The tribal council also got administrative contract from the Forestry and Nature Conservation Agency to co-managing the traditional community hunting grounds, and negotiating for a shared governance of the Katratripulr National Forest Recreation Area in their traditional territories.

Tao Foundation, for the Tao people on the Pongso no Tao, works on gaining the control of the trust fund set up in 2021 from a huge retrospective compensation of 2.55 billion Taiwan dollar (about 78.5 million US dollar) for nuclear waste dumping since 1982. The trust fund, currently dominated by the colonial restriction and administration, should be wisely used by the Tao people themself to make an alternative future of this Indigenous Island with an autonomy arrangement with the Taiwan government. Current situation is that even the government have given this big money as a reparation to implement the historical and transitional justice, they keep a strong control on both the governance and management of the fund and restricted its usages. Until now all the visionary transformation programs and projects are done or doing or planning spontaneously without any support from this common fund. There are the Tao cultural knowledge-base and Heritage keepers' group for Indigenous education, the Meyyowyo eco-cultural tourism associates for promoting an Indigenous interpretation system based on original place names and storytelling tradition, the Ahehep no Tao initiative for compiling and publishing the original Austronesian eco-calendar as the backbone of Tao seasonal livelihood, the Yabosokanen Homecare Center for the aging population. There are also proposals for public e-bike system for residents and tourists, daily necessities and foods supply cooperative for the community households, high-speed and safe ferries business for and by Tao people, integrated sustainable energy facilities for the islanders, etc.

Linking to our spiritual matrix, our work on autonomy is closely tied with promoting and restoring our original labors and ceremonies following the seasons, traditional song-singing in community gathering and storytelling in each extended family.

In relation to the above, what's most essential and critical for us is the Self-strengthening process of communities to keep our vitality and diversity alive. We keep nurturing the strength and resilience as change makers of our activist group through the tribal activist study circle and cadre leadership camp. There is training and development to become dignified Indigenous, and living capacity building to create community-based collective livelihood. Linking to our spiritual matrix, our work on autonomy is closely tied with promoting and restoring our original labors and ceremonies following the seasons, traditional song-singing in community gathering and storytelling in each extended family. Ultimately, for our people's survival and revival, Indigenous activists' strength and resilience can only come from embodying the embeddedness in the inter-species habitats and the connectedness with all beings around us in our territories of life networks

Further explorations

Articles

ICCA article: *https://evo.re/rd10101*

Videos

Survival and revival of Indigenous Taiwan in the post-colonial, post-modern, and post-tradition era: *https://evo.re/rd10102*

Interview with the author in Radical Democracy gathering: *https://evo.re/rd010103*

References and sources

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"Governance of Protected Areas: from understanding to action" (2013)

Jineolojî Academy

Global structure of research, education and publication on the science of women and life

Women hold flags of the Women's Protection Units (YPJ) during a demonstration, in the northeastern city of Qamishli, Syria, December 23, 2024.
Source: REUTERS/Orhan Qereman

Radical Democracy, Autonomy and Self-Determination in Kurdistan

We believe that every society has a very strong tradition of life beyond the state. If a society has been able to maintain its existence until today and has gained the consciousness to organize in order to fight for freedom, we can say that society still exists without the state.

Kurdistan is located at the center of the Fertile Crescent, which has been home to some of the earliest human civilizations, agricultural and village revolutions since 10,000 BC. It has historical sites such as Göbekli Tepe, Newala Çori, Çaxir Bazar, Çeme Xalan, etc. that bear traces of the earliest human civilizations at the foothills of the Toros-Zagros mountains and the Tigris-Euphrates rivers. It is a region enjoying all four seasons and having rich botanical diversity and fertile lands. Kurds, Assyrians, Syriacs, Armenians and Arabs have lived together in Kurdistan for years. In this region, the Kurds have been mostly engaged in agriculture and animal husbandry, the Arabs have mostly been engaged in animal husbandry while the Armenians, Assyrians and Syriacs have been engaged in crafts. Although patriarchal culture became dominant in Kurdish society following the advent of Islam, natural beliefs and culture centered around women have preserved themselves until today. The Kurds are mostly organized as clans and tribes through their own administrative and self-defense systems. Their autonomy was recognized at a certain level until the Ottoman Empire. Kurdistan was first divided into two parts (between the Persian Empire and the Ottoman Empire in the 17th century) and then into four parts among the states of Turkey, Iran, Syria and Iraq by the Treaty of Lausanne signed in 1923 due to imperialist plans on the region.

Since then, the part of Kurdistan in Turkey is known as Northern Kurdistan, the part in Iraq as Southern Kurdistan, the part in Iran as Eastern Kurdistan and the part in Syria as Southwestern Kurdistan, mostly known as Rojava (meaning West in the Kurdish language). Throughout history, uprisings have taken part in four parts of Kurdistan for the independence and freedom of Kurdistan. In the last two centuries, altogether 28 important uprisings for freedom took place in regions of all four parts of Kurdistan. However, they were all suppressed bloodily by nation states and imperialist powers. The four nation states (Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria) have implemented occupation policies, practices of physical and cultural genocide to colonize Kurdistan and use its rich resources, both above-ground and underground resources. Kurds, Armenians, Syriacs, Chaldeans, and Assyrians in Kurdistan have been massacred and displaced by these states, aiming at reducing their population. Further, some state rulers provoked some Kurdish tribes to collaborate with them by using Islam. Today, some Kurdish families, tribes and individuals continue to collaborate with these states by playing a role in the occupation and attacks on Kurdistan for their own profits or due to fear.

Kurdistan map
Suource: Encyclopedia Britannica

Current governance system

Although there is a model of community self-governance in Kurdistan on the basis of traditional social structures based on tribes, clans, families and beliefs, these structures gradually disintegrated and some of them have collaborated with occupying states and became tools of colonialism. In order to define the governance system in Kurdistan, we have to evaluate the situation in the four parts of Kurdistan separately.

The largest part of Kurdistan, North Kurdistan, is located within the borders of the Turkish nation-state, where the struggle to establish a self-governance system continues. In Northern Kurdistan, the Turkish state has committed many massacres, in the form of physical genocide, have taken place many times along with an ongoing political repression, ban of language and cultural expressions. About 5000 Kurdish villages were burnt down. Until today, the Turkish state continues to destroy systematically the nature, economy and livelihood of Kurdistan. After the last Kurdish uprising that was suppressed in 1940, no struggle for self-governance emerged for a long period.

Following the uprising led by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in 1978, the foundation for clandestine self-governance was built in rural areas and towns in the 1980s and 90s. Actually, the building process of the PKK in itself was based on practicing radical democracy within its own structures and relations. This became a source of inspiration and an example for the self-organising of the Kurdish society. The ways of how to organise collective life and economy, how to develop the political struggle and education, how to realise socialist values, friendship, solidarity, respect towards human and nature in one's own personality and relations where central points of discussions and establishing a revolutionary culture – at first among the guerrilla on the mountains, political prisoners and activists. The model of practiced democracy through collective reflection about daily life and work (tekmil), educations, assemblies and revolutionary values more and more turned into a popular culture, democratic conscience and way of self-organising against colonial state oppression in all four parts of Kurdistan. For example, the village population in many mountain regions (e.g. in the regions of Botan, Serhat, Zagros, Qandil...) has organized their village assemblies, councils, municipalities and self-defence by themselves on the basis of this culture.

Since then, structures of radical democracy or what we can also call people's self-governance (beside and despite the state) have been built up through people's, women's and youth's assemblies, neighborhood organising and a network of dozens of civil society organizations, social, political and cultural movements. The self-governance of society consists of congresses, communes, councils, academies, media, all-women media associations, youth movements, culture and arts activities, cooperatives, ecology platforms and other associations. In parallel to this Kurdish parliamentarians and mayors of democratic political parties have been working for general democratic change and the acknowledgment of the Kurdish people's rights within state institutions. Further, there is also a joint struggle and various forms of organising communally with different national, religious and cultural communities, youth and women's movements, left-socialist, feminist, democratic and revolutionary forces in different parts of Turkey. Despite these developments, Turkey has

intensified its crackdown, arresting politicians and mayors, restricting freedom of expression and speech, closing down democratic associations, political parties and stirring up racist-nationalist pogroms until today.

In South Kurdistan, the part of Kurdistan within the borders of Iraq, there has been a de-facto autonomy since 1991, as a result of the Kurdish people's resistance against the genocides perpetrated by the Iraqi state during Saddam Hussein's dictatorship. While formerly supporting Saddam, from 1990 onwards the US supported the establishment of the autonomous region Kurdistan in Iraq under the authority of the tribal parties KDP and PUK as a part of its wars on Iraq aiming at gaining hegemony over the Middle East. Since 2003, this region has been known as the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. While one part of the territory has been governed by the KDP of the Barzani family clan, another part of the territory has been governed by the PUK of the Talabani family. This tribal and family government model is based on feudal power structures and capitalist profits. The ruling families collaborate with imperialist powers and colonial nation states to maintain their power and pursue anti-democratic, misogynistic and nationalist policies. As a result, in 2014 the KDP exposed the Ezîdî people in Shengal to the genocide and feminicide committed by ISIS. Further it has neglected the democratic self-administration and supported the ban of the Ezîdî Freedom Democracy Party (PADE). Both democratic forms of self-organisation were established by the people of Shengal in the aftermath of the genocide.

Kurdish women in Newroz celebration, the start of the spring season

The refugee camp Maxmur is another place where radical democracy has been practiced in South Kurdistan for over 26 years, now. Over 16,000 Kurds live in the camp. These families were displaced from North Kurdistan due to massacres and village destruction by Turkish army in 1992–93. Since then they have built up their own system of self-governance, including the first school system in native Kurdish language using Latin Alphabet, a health care and social system and their self-defense to ensure the basic needs of all people in the camp. As well as the people of the region of autonomous administration in Shengal, also the camp Maxmur and its inhabitants have been confronted with military attacks by the IS, airstrikes by the Turkish army as well as repressions by the KDP.

In Rojava Kurdistan, people's self-governance has been shaped since the 1980s, as result of the liberation struggle waged by the PKK. In fact, the Syrian state has not recognized the majority of Kurds as its citizens and has not allowed them to benefit from any legal rights. Following the Qamishlo riots in 2004, clandestinely structures of self-governance were built up and institutionalized in 2011, with the influence of popular movements in the region. After ISIS was defeated by the people's and women's defense forces YPG/YPJ/SDF, the model of democratic autonomy was also advocated and established by the various population groups in North and East Syria. The Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES) is based on communes, district and canton councils in 7 regions. At each level the people elect one man and one women as co-chairs and members of committees for social affairs, justice commission, economy and agriculture, education, sports, health and environment, culture and arts. The youth and

The principle of equal representation and the co-chair system are implemented in all facets of life

women's committees and their representatives in the general councils are elected by the youth and women themselves.
Despite state oppression, a non-nationalist and social system adopting an ecological approach based on direct and participatory democracy and women's freedom, in the axis of Abdullah Öcalan's paradigm on democratic nation, democratic confederalism and democratic modernity, has been implemented since 2005. A holistic system of democratic society organisation has been built in the four parts of Kurdistan as well as on the basis of cooperation with democratic anti-system groups in Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria. Organizations established by Kurds who have migrated outside Kurdistan together with people who participate in a joint struggle on the axis of a paradigm based on democracy, ecology and women's freedom are connected in a confederal manner in different parts of the world. The roles of women in these systems and organizations are decisive. The characteristic-autonomous organization of the women's movement in Kurdistan has paved the way for women's will and representation in all facets of life for more than 40 years by participating in all spheres of life, including politics, self-defence and social life. The principle of equal representation and the co-chair system are implemented in all facets of life. All ethnic groups and people from other nationalities have their own self-governance systems, organization and election quota in this system.

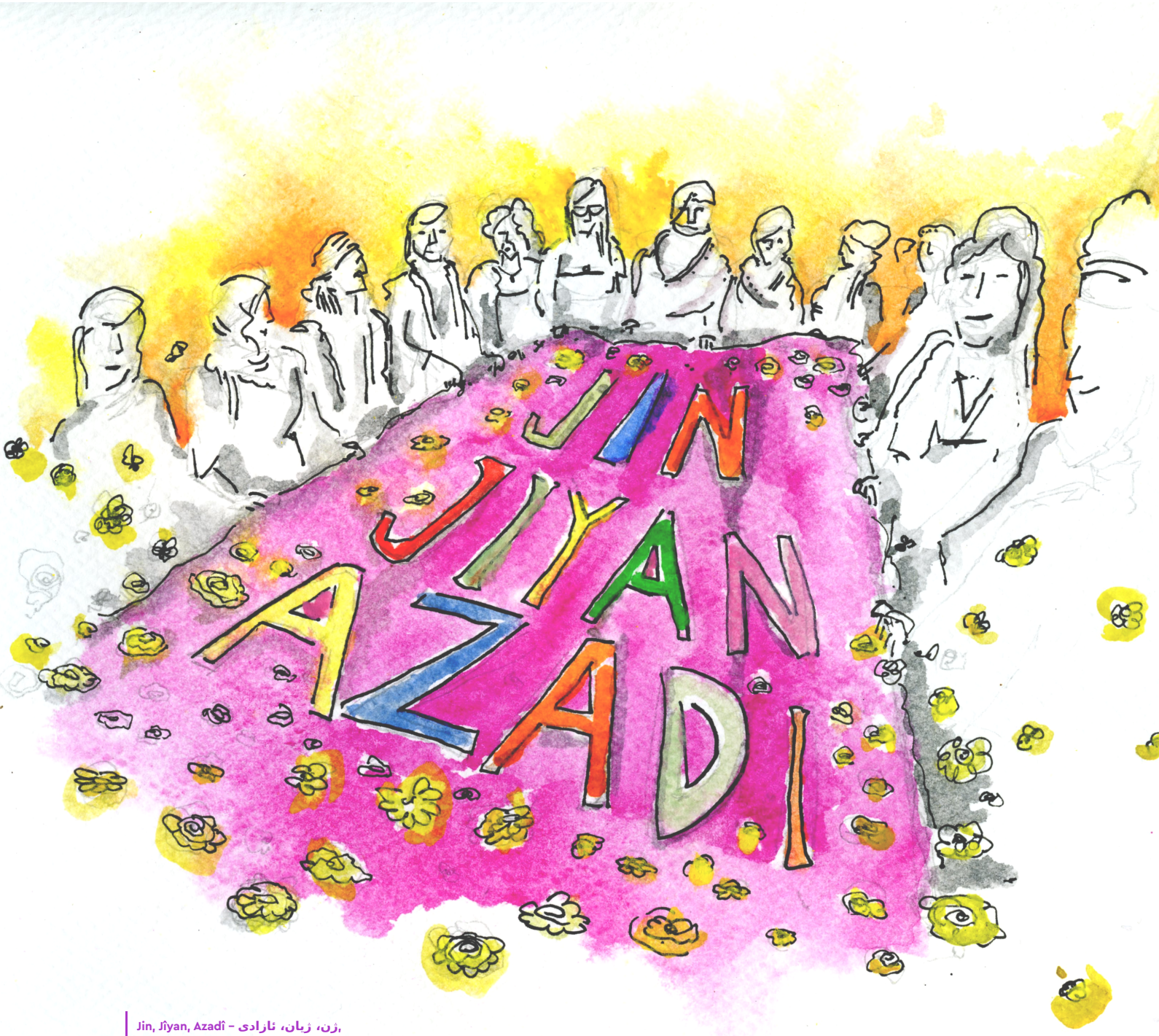
Relationship with the nation-states

Aside from the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in South Kurdistan, the status and autonomous administrations in other parts of Kurdistan have not been recognized, yet. The status of South Kurdistan functioned at first as a de-facto autonomy after a no-fly zone was declared by the US-lead coalition forces in 1991, and parliamentary elections were held in 1992. The KRG was internationally recognized following the overthrow of the Saddam regime in 2003. As mentioned above, this governance system is not a democratic system but is based on state mentality and structures: The KRG has maintained alliances with the Turkish and Iranian states according to its political interests and economic profits, and oppresses democratic movements and models of radical democracy inside South Kurdistan as well as in other parts of Kurdistan.

In North Kurdistan, the Turkish state insists on a policy of denial and repression against the Kurds. Everyone who demands autonomy or is involved in democratic society organising is accused of being a 'terrorist'. In East Kurdistan, the religious regime responds to the political demands of the Kurdish people either by ignoring or arresting and executing them. It does not accept any way of democratic self-organization neither in Kurdistan nor Iran.
In Rojava (West Kurdistan) since 2012 a system of democratic autonomy has been implemented that has inspired many people all over the world. But neither the Syrian state nor the UN or international law mechanisms have recognized its status, yet. So far only the Parliament of Catalonia has recognized the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. Imperialist powers such as the USA and Russia are striving for control of the Middle East. In this context, they have offered limited military support for the fight against ISIS. Through certain NGOs, they are also trying to exert political and cultural influence. As Rojava and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria are not officially recognized the region and the people are exposed to constant violations of international law, especially to airstrikes and occupation attacks by the Turkish army.

Governance system

The system of democratic autonomy and democratic confederalism is based on four pillars; communes, assemblies, academies and cooperatives. Communes are organising in neighborhoods and villages, defined as the smallest social unit; assemblies are based on direct democracy through co-chairs of the communes and different working fields; cooperatives are a solution model for economic problems; academies are popular, collective learning spaces for the intellectual, and scientific foundations of the system. Communes are defined as an area where people live together. A group of people at a workplace, a group consisting of students, or even a family can organize themselves through a commune. If we consider it as a general social system, each family and individual participates at least in one commune with their abilities and knowledge. Communes hold their own assemblies and spokespersons of the communes express their projects, plans, decisions and opinions at the regional assemblies. At assemblies, direct and representative democracy are closely intertwined. They are formed through democratic processes; representatives are elected, when they fail to fulfill their duties and to represent the will of the commune, they can be criticized and even recalled.



Jin, Jîyan, Azadî – ژن، ژیان، ئازادی,
meaning "Woman, Life, Freedom"

Cooperatives are models based on solidarity and cooperation, meeting economic, social and cultural needs. Academies are structures that provide different forms of learning and education for society. At the academies, people can learn how to write and read, they can learn a profession or discuss philosophical issues. The number of participants, curriculum, time and place can be determined according to needs. The difference between schools and academies is that academies are more flexible, and often the participants also live together during the time of a one to six month lasting education program.

The model and mindset of the democratic nation are an alternative to the nation-state. The democratic nation model embodies a non-state social organization based on assemblies, free citizenship, social life, democratic politics, social justice, economy, health, education, self-defense, culture, diplomatic relations and alliances. In the democratic nation model, social problems are solved through joint decisions by communities and assemblies. Its main goal is to limit state influence, to make the state unnecessary and irrelevant. It prioritizes reconciliation, peace and negotiation as long as the state respects democracy, otherwise, it uses its legitimate right to resistance and self-defense.

The role of the morethan-human

The relationship between the natural world and people persists in Kurdish society, and has retained characteristics of a natural society. The different geographic and climate conditions in different regions of Kurdistan have also an impact on the vegetation, creating various ways of life, cultural expressions and livelihood. In many regions a half-normadic way of life was predominant. People spent the summer with their sheep on the highlands of the mountains and the winter in their villages. In other regions agriculture and gardening have been at the centre of life. Some regions of Kurdistan are known for their richness of fruit-trees, some for their certain vegetables or herbs, others for wheat, lentils or chickpeas. Collective planting and harvesting, cooking and baking according to the season has been a common tradition. Each region has its own basis for creating food autonomy in cooperation and exchange with neighbor regions.
Despite nowadays predominance of monotheistic religions, the belief in the sacredness of fire, trees, mountains and birds persists. Newroz, the new day, has been celebrated for thousands of years on March 21 as the beginning of a new year. Many festivals of different peoples and religious communities of Mesopotamia, which praise the creation of the universe and life, are celebrated in the first week of April. For the people of Kurdistan these spring days symbolize new beginnings and resistance against tyranny. Annual assemblies and congresses of the democratic confederal system also take place on these days. The arrival of spring after the cold and dark days or winter, also brings new life to Kurdistan, create unity of people and give inspirations for new steps, decisions and projects of democratic autonomy.

Traditional and new inequalities

In Kurdistan society, patriarchal, feudal and religious traditions have heavily oppressed women in social life. The Kurdistan liberation struggle and the autonomous organization of women have brought important social changes in this respect, but they have still not been able to completely overcome these inequalities and forms of oppression. Therefore inequalities are being tackled continuously through women's self-organization in all areas of social life, the organization of their own parallel confederal

women's system, and the principle of equal representation of women and men that insures equal participation in decision-making processes in all areas of political, economic, legal and social life and self-defence. It is essential to continue the women's revolution, to stay connected and develop further a philosophy of life based on Jin-Jiyan-Azadî, and to strengthen structures of women's autonomous self-governance, self-defence and self-sufficient economy. Rather than demanding something from states and dominant men or criticizing them, we emphasize the precious meaning of living self-determined and collectively. Women's liberation is at the same time connected to efforts for the transformation of dominant men. With the concept, which we call Hevjiyana Azad (free collective life), we aim to challenge all relations between men and women on the basis of freedom, and equality in diversity.

The relation with other movements

A joint struggle with all democratic organizations in Kurdistan is taken as a basis for achieving national unity between the four parts of Kurdistan within the perspective of a democratic nation. National unity, free from nationalism, refers to joint efforts to build a stateless nation of the Kurdish people. Referring to the pillars of democratic confederalism of the Middle East against colonialism and imperialism, it promotes the democratization of religion, women's freedom, unity and solidarity among people based on common democratic values among the peoples of the Middle East against nationalism and religious fundamentalism.
For a global struggle, the structures of democratic autonomy in Kurdistan form alliances to build worldwide structures of peoples' and women's democratic confederalism based on the paradigm of democratic modernity. Ecological life, the development of a stateless democratic society and women's freedom are the main pillars of this paradigm. Abdullah Öcalan summarizes the historical reality of Kurdistan and the current freedom struggle with the following words:

"History has placed Kurdistan and the Kurds in such a position that obliged them to unite their freedom, equality and democracy with the freedom, equality and democracy of the region and all peoples."

Demonstration in the Republic Square in Dihê, on the occasion of Newroz in 2025
Source: Yeni Yaşam Gazetesi

Current threats and challenges

The massacres, attacks and occupation that the people of Kurdistan have experienced in the last two centuries have been shaped by international imperialist plans. Since World War I, this system maintained its hegemony in the region by continuously creating threats and conflicts in the Middle East. During the last 3 decades the US and other hegemonic state forces intended to establish their 'new world order' through further multilayered wars. However, Kurdistan is at the center of the conflict of global hegemony, also known as World War III. Our lands are constantly subjected to attacks and massacres due to a multi-pronged and violent systemic war of capitalist modernity against the forces of democratic modernity. Therefore the unrecognized status of Rojava Kurdistan causes the difficult situation of building a democratic system under constant war attacks, imposed isolation and embargo. Further, open violent and subtle attacks of the neoliberal system aim at liberalizing the development of the revolution and democratic self-administration.

Another dynamic that threatens the system of democratic autonomy are efforts to revive and aggravate patriarchal violence and traditions to counteract women's freedom struggle. The fact that a large part of Kurdish society is Muslim is exploited by Salafist religious organizations that propagate deeply patriarchal gender roles and relationships. In particular, the administration in South Kurdistan, which has close relations with colonialist and imperialist powers, is fueling nationalism. Its policies attack friendship relations between peoples and global solidarity, women's freedom, civil rights of the Kurds and other peoples living in the region.

At the same time multiple attacks and threats of Turkish state agencies and armed forces are targeting the society, destroying settlements, infrastructure, the nature, cultural and historical heritage in North, South and West Kurdistan. Displacement policies are implemented to depopulate these regions. Repeatedly journalists, community leaders and political activists of the Democratic Autonomy in Rojava, the women's and freedom movement in Kurdistan are assassinated by drones or killer teams of the Turkish army.

The most effective method of resistance and fighting against all these attacks is to elaborate tools, methods and ways of organizations that equip society against these attacks by insisting on organising life in the framework of democratic autonomy. We fight against physical, military attacks by developing self-defense awareness. We resist against special warfare and black propaganda by developing an alternative education system and free media in native language, and by strengthening moral values in society that are linked to politics of solidarity and freedom. Against economic warfare and embargo, efforts are continuing to build a communal economy and a health system based on the principle of self-sufficiency.

Future plans and visions

One of the important conclusions we have reached within the reality of Kurdistan is that societies can form their own democratic systems without a state. Society is essentially shaped around morals that express common values, and a political structure that expresses collective life. However, the state legitimizes itself by exploiting the self-sufficient economic system, self-governance and self-defense power of society. Therefore, what we should do is to overcome the authoritarianism in our

personalities as well as to develop systems that overcome all kinds of authoritarian structures but do not leave society unorganized and defenseless without self-governance. These systems can spread in society, taking society's historical tradition into account. We believe that every society has a very strong tradition of life beyond the state. If a society has been able to maintain its existence until today and has gained the consciousness to organize in order to fight for freedom, we can say that society still exists without the state. We should not think or structure radical democracy as a social engineering exercise but to water these roots of communal life and help them to blossom again. Our experiences reveal that results based on certain principles can be achieved through harmonic synthesis between modern and traditional ways of life. We believe that the potential for achieving this in the world is greater than expected. There is a vital need for a common struggle against genocide, ecocide and femicide. Firstly, we need to weave global networks to defend our land, water, forests, mountains, bodies, and the common values of humanity along with other peoples in our regions. To the extent that our revolutions and the system we have built take root in our own countries, they become stronger, their bodies can withstand wind and storm, i.e. attacks, and can spread their seeds and branches over wide territories ■

Further explorations

Articles

Publications on the Jineolojî Website: *https://evo.re/rd10200*

Publications by ADM: *https://evo.re/rd10201*

The Kurdish Women's Movement by Meral Duzgun: *https://evo.re/rd10202*

Videos

Jineology: Feminism & Patriarchy In The Middle East: *https://evo.re/rd10203*

The Kurdish Women's Movement: History, Theory, Practice: *https://evo.re/rd10204*

Interview with Necibe Qeredaxî: *https://evo.re/rd10205*

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Abdullah Ocalan: Manifesto of the Democratic Civilization, Volume V, 2010

Xochitl Leyva Solano

Activist Researcher
from Chiapas, Mexico

"We are facing a system that has kept us invisible and forgotten, but our resistance is the greatest act of rebellion". Statement by Zapatista women on the 31st anniversary.
Source: El Coleto (FB) / Radio Pozol

Contributions of Zapatista Autonomy to Democracy

"Zapatista autonomy broke with the tradition in Latin America where indigenous autonomies had been, above all, state-centered. According to its history and context, Zapatista autonomy is rather de facto"

This text seeks to answer the question: How is the Zapatista movement exploring the dimensions of autonomy and what does this mean for democracy? To answer I begin by placing at the center words and work of Zapatista women and men (something we have learned in these more than three decades of walking alongside them). Here is an excerpt from the words of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN, for its acronym in Spanish) spokesman, Subcommader Insurgent Moises, given on December 31, 2024, in the Caracol Oventic located in the mountains of Los Altos de Chiapas (Mexico). There, the "Zapatista Cultural Festival and signers of the Declaration for Life" took place as part of the celebrations of the 31st anniversary of what the Zapatistas called "the beginning of the war against oblivion", referring to the armed uprising of January 1, 1994[1]. These words were addressed to Zapatista combatants fallen in duty, to militiamen and women as well as grassroots supporters. The message was read in front of the people of the world. SubMoi said:

"Comrades fallen in duty; we have discovered one more path than we had discovered 31 years ago. The one forced upon us by the capitalist system; violence because it leaves us no other way; the other is the peaceful one without leaving us to the objective which is the ***liberation from the capitalist system****. And it is here where they will not leave us, here where we have to be organized to defend ourselves, because they will never, never, never stop exploiting us [...] Fallen comrades we discovered two weapons in the peaceful struggle which is resistance and rebellion [...] We have already seen that it is possible to have a peaceful political struggle with resistance and rebellion [...] No, we do not want the war of death that the capitalist system makes. We fight for life, we fight for life and for life [...] But we also want to make it clear, it is not right that they want to kill us and that they want to make war against us for what it means to build* ***truth, freedom, justice and democracy for the people****. But we also want to make it clear that we are also prepared to defend ourselves. We are not threatening, we are telling the truth, we are going to defend ourselves if they come to attack us, we are thousands of combatants[...] A year ago we said:* ***in common we have to build a new life, a new society****. We have already experienced all the evils of the system, we already know it, now it is our turn to make the change, we, the peoples of Mexico, those who want to organize and the world[...] Let us think now, let us discuss now, in each geography where we are and according to our calendars, how we want a new life [...] beyond [...] capital. We, the Zapatistas, think that* ***Mother Earth is the source of life, without her, we will not live*** *[...]. The source of life for future generations to come, therefore, we must be responsible for taking care of them [...] We invite with all our hearts for the new life and the new society, we the Zapatistas are demonstrating that it is possible [...]. We the Zapatistas will dedicate ourselves, we* ***will concentrate on how to care for and work with the earth and, along with it, to care for our health to continue fighting and in the construction of another form of life without capitalism****"*[2].

The Zapatista movement cannot be understood if it is not placed in the context of war from which it emerges. Not only because they declared war on the Mexican government and army based on Art. 39 of the Constitution, in which the people have the inalienable right to alter or modify their form of government[3], but, above all, because since they became publicly known, the EZLN stated in the First Declaration of the Lacandon Forest to be the result of more than 500 years of resistance to what they called "an undeclared genocidal war against our peoples". Then, they asked for support for the Mexican people's plan for work, land, housing, food, health, education, independence, freedom, democracy, justice and peace. And they closed by saying that they would not stop fighting until they succeeded in forming a free and democratic government for Mexico.

As readers can imagine, the Mexican state responded immediately with a counterinsurgency policy and a low-intensity war in the midst of which the EZLN and Mexican civil society had to act. The latter said "Yes" to the Zapatista political demands and "No" to the war and pushed for a peace process in which the government, the EZLN and civil society itself were the protagonists.

Mural zapatista "La vida en la comunidad"
Source: https://acortar.link/WRfssa

Mexican democracy and the Zapatista movement

In the Mexican public sphere of the 1990s, the dominant discourse was that of electoral democracy within the framework of something broader: the democratic transition after almost 70 years of government by the State party (the Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI for its acronyms in Spanish) and after a major split within the PRI itself in 1988.

Six months after the armed uprising, in June 1994, in the midst of the counterinsurgency war situation, the EZLN launched the Second Declaration of the Lacandon Forest in which it announced that it was taking aside its arms and called for a civil and peaceful effort through the convening of a national dialogue, which it called: the National Democratic Convention. The goal was to achieve "democratic change" and "the transition towards democracy, freedom, and justice."

In that second declaration, the Zapatistas invited Mexican civil society and leftist political parties to meet in the Zapatista village of La Realidad, in the heart of the Lacandon Forest, to organize civil expression and defend the sovereign will of the people. The goal they proposed was to arrive at a transitional government and a new constitution. At this time, the EZLN considered the electoral route as a way in which it did not get directly involved but neither did it obstruct it. At the same time, there was an encouragement of convergence with leftist parties that seemed to have shared interests.

Both aspects were to change radically because representatives of the leftist parties in the Senate betrayed the spirit of what was signed in 1996 as peace accords between the EZLN and the Mexican government. All this led the Zapatista movement to explore other paths and, specifically, the path of de facto autonomy without permission.

Zapatista de facto and comprehensive Autonomy: A Contribution to the World

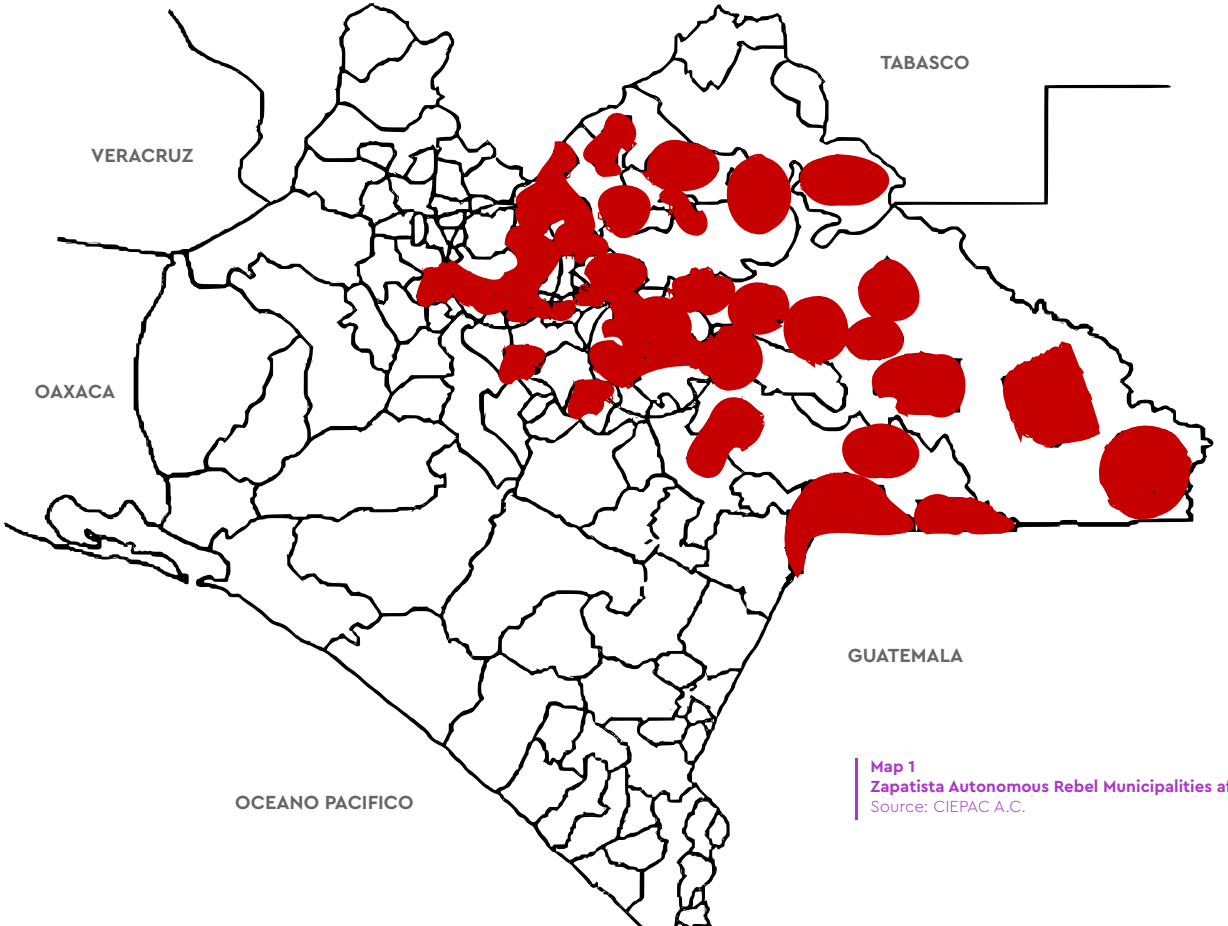
Zapatista autonomy broke with the tradition in Latin America where indigenous autonomies had been, above all, state-centered. According to its history and context, Zapatista autonomy is rather de facto. I mean, it has been exercised beyond the permission and recognition of the State, but supported by international laws such as ILO Convention 169[4]. Convention ratified by the Mexican government in 1990.

Zapatista autonomy has been lived as a way of life, as a collective and anti-systemic struggle gestated in the midst of wars. It is the result of a permanent dialogue between civilian and military authorities and grassroots communities formed by grandmothers and grandfathers, mothers and fathers, young men and women, as well as children. Zapatista autonomy is comprehensive because covers all aspects of life and is organized by areas of work that vary from community to community, but include: women rights, health, education, government, justice, agroecology, agrarian affairs, collective work, care of Mother Earth, commerce, transportation, civil registry, arts (dances, theater, music, murals, handicrafts, paintings, sculptures, poetry), science and communication (social networks, radio, video and cinema).

Organization of the Zapatista government

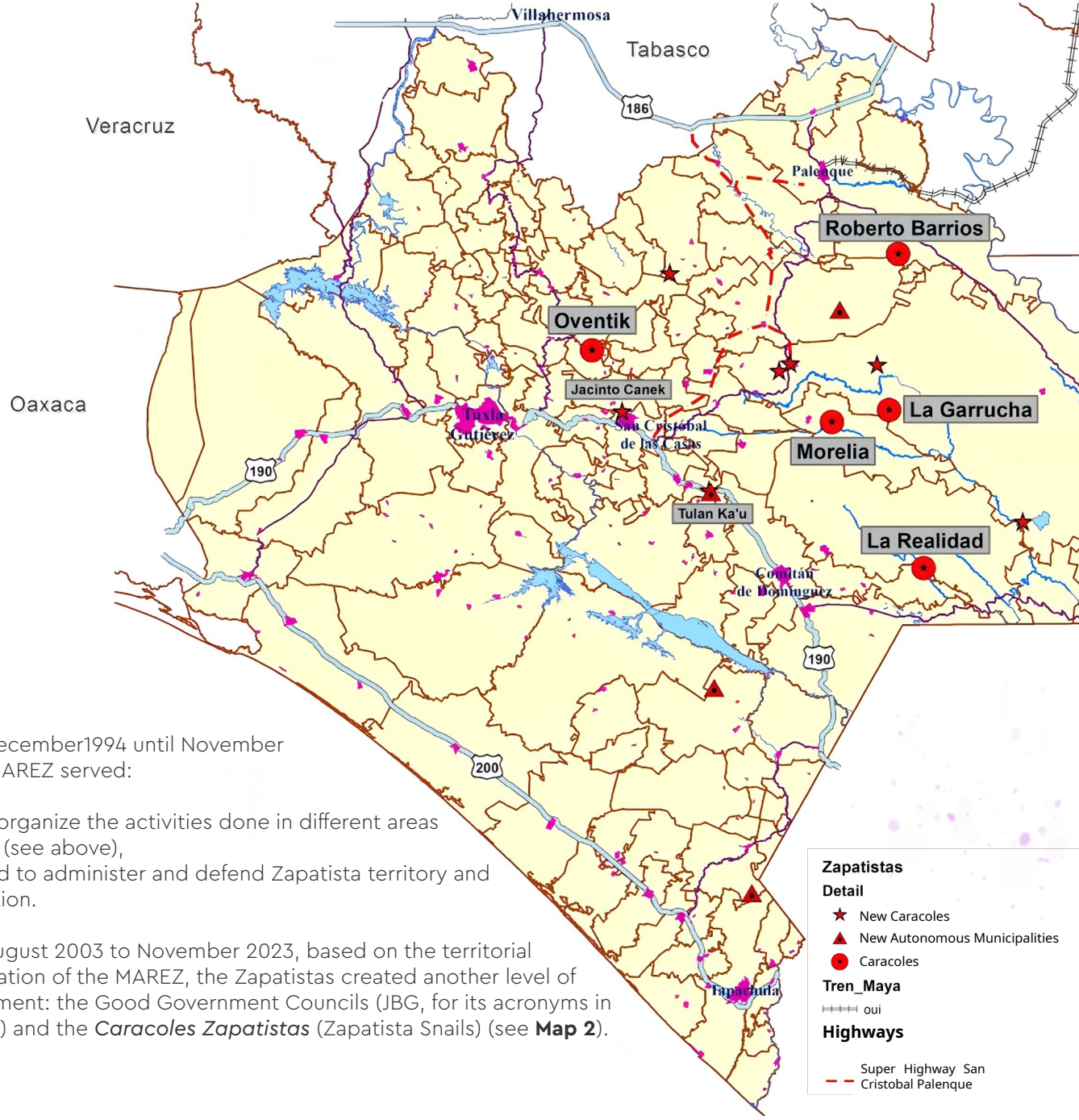
There are important differences between the Zapatista government and the Mexican representative democracy. The first one is about economic support. Representative democracy obtains its economic support from the Mexican government and private capital collected by political parties and politicians. On the contrary, the Zapatista government is based on voluntary work without payment to its authorities. People's participation as authorities is part of duties and communal rights. The Zapatista authorities are elected in assemblies by agreements and consensus. There are four different Zapatista organizational levels to govern: communal, municipal, zone and regional. But how do these four levels work? Let me explain briefly.

In December 1994, the Zapatista movement created the Zapatista Rebel Autonomous Municipalities (MAREZ, for its acronyms in Spanish) in order to break the siege imposed by government counterinsurgency policies. The Zapatista municipalities had different territorial delimitations than the governmental municipalities, they were self-organized based on Zapatista ethical principles and revolutionary laws. They were under the military surveillance of the Zapatista forces but above all, under the organization of the Zapatista civilians, I mean, the Zapatista grassroots supporters spread in different indigenous, *campesino* and rural areas of Chiapas (see **Map 1**).



Map 1
Zapatista Autonomous Rebel Municipalities after 1994
Source: CIEPAC A.C.

Map 2
Zapatistas Caracoles and JBG (2003–2023)
Source: Maël Lhopital for DESMI A.C.



From December1994 until November 2023, MAREZ served:

1) to organize the activities done in different areas of work (see above),
2) and to administer and defend Zapatista territory and population.

From August 2003 to November 2023, based on the territorial organization of the MAREZ, the Zapatistas created another level of government: the Good Government Councils (JBG, for its acronyms in Spanish) and the *Caracoles Zapatistas* (Zapatista Snails) (see **Map 2**).

Although each MAREZ had its own particularities, we can say that the Zapatista civil authorities always worked as a team and, in general terms, we can point out that there was: the Autonomous Council, the Agrarian Commission and the Commission of Honor and Justice. All of them elected in community assemblies, part of each rebel municipality (MAREZ).

Zapatista municipalities had different numbers of communities as part of them. At community or local level there were different kinds of authorities, such as: an Agent, and a Commissariat, and each of them in turn had their respective collective-work-team that included the Commander, and his community police forces.

In August 2003, after self-criticism and internal analysis about the equal distribution of economic resources and the relation to international and national solidarity supporters, the Zapatistas created a new level of government called the "Good Government Council" ("*Juntas de Buen Gobierno*" in Spanish). The term "Council" ("*Junta*") was used not by chance, it was due to the way Zapatistas operated to exercise decision making processes: "always together" (siempre juntos).

The authorities of the Good Government Councils worked in a socio-territorial space called ***Caracoles Zapatista*** or Zapatista Snails. From 2003 to 2019 there were five Caracoles and in 2019 Zapatistas created more, until twelve in total[5]. The ***Caracoles Zapatistas*** have been the political space and territory where Zapatistas meet national and international civil society. The Caracoles are also the space where the Zapatista authorities who are members of the JBG meet every day of the year, 24 hours a day, to carry out their functions at the zone or regional level. The JBG authorities are appointed by the different communities and zones that make up the movement. They hold rotating positions that change every month. These authorities are dedicated to the administration of common goods, to the attention of productive projects and to the organization of supracommunity collective work as well as to the resolution of conflicts, the administration of justice and the elaboration of communiques to the outside world.

The MAREZ, the Good Government Councils and the Caracoles were based on the principle of "commanding by obeying" where the people command and the Zapatista government obeys. This idea was key for what Zapatistas called "good government" in opposition to "bad government" referring to the Mexican government run by representative democracy and political parties.

The Mexican "bad government" ("*mal gobierno*" as they say in Spanish) has been criticized not only by the Zapatistas but also by many radical movements and analysts. It has been criticized for its authoritarianism, corruption, clientelism, and co-optation. All these labels are used not only to describe the 70 years of rule by the party governing the Mexican State (PRI, for its Spanish acronym) but also to refer to the democratically elected governments of the right and left that have held power at different levels in recent years. In response, the Zapatista government created and practices seven basic principles:

To Obey, Not Command
To Propose, Not Impose
To Represent, Not Supplant
To Convince, Not Conquer
To Construct, Not Destroy
To Serve Others, Not Serve Oneself
To Work from Below, Not Seek to Rise

In cases where a Zapatista authority violates any of these principles, their case is dealt with at the local level and may even be taken up by the Good Government Councils. After being "studied," that is, analyzed collectively, this may lead to the dismissal of the authority in question or their expulsion from the movement.

It is also important to note that in the Zapatista government, people are not professional politicians but members of the community or the organization who are educated by their families, the Zapatista school, and the organization as people who are jointly responsible for collective and communal life. This life exists without the intervention of political parties; on the contrary, at the center are the assembly, agreement, and/or consensus.

Women participation in the Autonomous Government

The respect shown to the women of the support bases and their inclusion in all spheres of life and struggle has been a priority for the Zapatista movement as a whole. All one has to do is listen to the women in meetings on different levels or in the written and audio-visual media available on the Internet, where they narrate in detail their situation before and after joining the EZLN. As Mayor (*Major*) Ana Maria explained in 1994:

We demanded from the ***compañeros*** of our villages that women can organise as well, represent something, do something, not only the men. Whenever we arrived at the communities, there were only men at the meetings and in the study circles. We worked a lot so that women would stand up and have the opportunity to do something; women themselves were asking for it. They would say: "if men will study and learn things, why should we not?" We also want to train, learn something [...] Furthermore, we have insurgent ***compañeras*** who have proven that they can; so, yes, women can, just give us the opportunity! That is how many women began to enter the militia.

Zapatista women today, 32 years after the creation of the Women's Revolutionary Law[6], participate on equal terms in the regular militia forces and the general command, as well as in the Councils of Good Government, the local and zone committees and the commissions that make up the different levels of autonomous organisation. But despite that reality, Zapatista women describe how their rights came to be, the enormous difficulties they still face and what remains to be accomplished.

A turn in the Zapatista Autonomy[7]

Zapatista autonomy and its government are so alive that they continue to flow and transform day by day. I will briefly mention the changes they underwent between 2023 and 2024, when the Zapatista movement celebrated the 30th and 31st anniversaries of the "beginning of the war against oblivion"—as they call January 1, 1994.

These changes were announced in a series of communiqués published between October 22 and December 20, 2023[8]. Reading these statements should be complemented by the words of the general command of the EZLN and its support bases, who were the protagonists of the first session of what the Zapatistas called the Encounters of Resistance and Rebellion. This session was held in December 2024 at CIDECI Las Casas/Unitierra-Chiapas.

In the aforementioned series of communiqués, the Zapatistas announced the disappearance of the autonomous structure that existed until 2023, namely the Zapatista Autonomous Rebel Municipalities (MAREZ) and the Good Government Councils (JBG)[9]. These changes, they explained, are necessary for security reasons given the narco-war ravaging various parts of Chiapas, but also to confront the worst of the "Capitalist Hydra". They stated: "We have prepared ourselves so that our peoples may survive, even if isolated from one another."

"La travesía por la vida"
Source: Paola Stefani (@paozen)

The Mexican "bad government" ("mal gobierno" as they say in Spanish) has been criticized not only by the Zapatistas but also by many radical movements and analysts. It has been criticized for its authoritarianism, corruption, clientelism, and co-optation.

The new autonomous structure[10] is based on Local Action Groups (GAL, Spanish acronym), which exist in every community where Zapatistas live. Several GALs can form Zapatista Autonomous Government Collectives (CGAZ, Spanish acronym) to address issues that concern several GALs. And finally, there are the Assemblies of Zapatista Autonomous Government Collectives, which convene zone meetings when requested by the CGAZ. These are not spaces of authority, they clarify, but of coordination. Thus, "the pyramid is inverted," returning decision-making power to the peoples and communities.

That December 2024, the Zapatistas also shared with us one of the most radical decisions they had ever made: to declare "no ownership" of a portion of the recovered lands[11]. They considered that ownership of land, both private and communal, has pitted peoples against each other, so land under "common work" will not be

owned by anyone. It will be worked in shifts and through agreements between the GAL and the neighbors, whether or not they are members of political parties. In that same session, the Zapatistas developed "the Genealogy of the Common" to explain where this type of work comes from, as well as their experience of practicing the common with their Zapatista brothers and sisters.

The Zapatistas emphatically told us that the JBG and MAREZ served as their political school, but they reproduced "the bad things about governments." The appointment of representative authorities removed decision-making from the participation of the people. The rotating nature of the positions made it difficult to continue projects, and they were unable to incorporate women and youth equitably. The "pyramid," they added, also contributed positive aspects: learning self-government, the need for women to be authorities, practicing what good government for the people should be like, learning both how to do "true justice" and how to make laws.

A final idea to continue the struggle

In this time of the collapse of representative democracy I wonder how many governments in the world that boast of being democratic would be capable of such a deep and collective self-criticism. How many of those democracies would be willing to try a new form of government for life, putting Mother Earth, women and common or no private property at the center. The Zapatistas are doing it and in doing they challenge, provoke and invite us, saying emphatically: No to wars, Yes to Life. Undoubtedly, this is one of their contributions to the world[12]

Young zapaista in the play "El Común"
Source: Radio Pozol [↗]

Notes

[1] For those interested in following his words and activities of the 31st anniversary and other activities, go to the Enlace Zapatista and Radio Zapatista websites, as well as to FB Radio Pozol.

[2] Taken and transcribed from https://www.facebook.com/CdhFrayba/videos/881163953897023). Boldface mine.

[3] "Article 39. The national sovereignty is vested, originally and essentially, in the people. Public power comes from the people and it is institutionalized for the people's benefit. People, at all times have the inalienable right to change or modify its form of government". Taken from https://archivos.juridicas.unam.mx/www/legislacion/federal/leyes/consting.pdf

[4] On line: https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/nrmlx_en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:55:0::NO::P55_TYPE%2CP55_LANG%2CP55_DOCUMENT%2CP55_NODE:REV%2Cen%2CC169%2C%2FDocument.

[5] On line: https://www.jornada.com.mx/2019/08/18/politica/008n1pol.

[6] On line: https://schoolsforchiapas.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Zapatista-Womens-Revolutionary-Laws.pdf.

[7] This section is taken from the Presentation written by Leyva, Cubells, Alonso and Köhler for the book entitled Autonomía Zapatista frente a la Tormenta. Madrid and San Cristóbal de Las Casas, CLACSO, Cooperativa Editorial Retos, CJA-CUCSH-UdeG, Traficantes de Sueños, 2025: 8–10.

[8] First communique on line: https://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2023/10/23/first-part-the-motives-of-the-wolf/. Last communique on line: https://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2023/12/22/twentieth-and-last-part-the-common-and-non-property/.

[9] On line: https://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2023/11/06/fourth-part-and-first-approach-alert-several-necessary-deaths/.

[10] On line: https://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2023/11/13/ninth-part-the-new-structure-of-zapastista-autonomy/.

[11] On line. https://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2023/12/22/twentieth-and-last-part-the-common-and-non-property/.

[12] For more information about the legacy of Zapatismo see Enlace Zapatista (https://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/), Radio Zapatista (https://radiozapatista.org/) and the Collection The Zapatista Beacon (https://alfarozapatista.jkopkutik.org/ and https://radiozapatista.org/?p=43471).

Further explorations

"Las Compañeras Tienen Grado / Zapatista Women": *https://evo.re/rd10301*

Who are the Zapatistas?: *https://evo.re/rd10302*

"The Zapatista Uprising, 30 Years Later": *https://evo.re/rd10302*

References and sources

First Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle (December, 1993): *https://evo.re/rd10304*

Sixth Declaration of the Selva Lacandona (June, 2005): *https://evo.re/rd10305*

EZLN. 2016. "Critical Thought in the Face of the Capitalist Hydra: I", Contributions by the Sixth Commission of the EZLN. Durham: Duke University Press.

Leyva, X. 2022. Wars, Zapatismo, Networks. *https://evo.re/rd10306*

Alonso and Alonso. 2022. An Overview of Zapatismo: *https://evo.re/rd10307*

Radicalizing democracy does not always take the form of rejecting the state outright. In many contexts, communities pursue practices that expand democratic participation by negotiating, contesting, and sometimes cooperating with existing state structures. This approach reflects the recognition that the state, despite its colonial and exclusionary origins, remains a central arena where struggles over rights, sovereignty, and recognition unfold. For marginalized peoples, engaging with the state can open doors to legal victories, territorial protection, and institutional acknowledgment of alternative forms of governance. At the same time, these engagements do not mean submission to state authority; rather, they are often tactical and strategic, combining pressure from below with demands for structural change from within. In this sense, radical democracy is not simply an "outside" project, but a relational one—shaped through constant negotiation between community-based autonomy and the formal frameworks of state power.

In Australia, the revitalization of Aboriginal governance traditions illustrates this dynamic. First Nations communities have fought for recognition of their decision-making systems, councils, and cultural protocols within the framework of the modern settler state. The push for treaty processes and constitutional recognition is not merely symbolic—it is an effort to institutionalize Indigenous authority alongside existing state law. These negotiations create a space where Aboriginal self-determination reshapes democratic practice, challenging the exclusivity of the state while compelling it to share power.

Self-determination in relation with State governmental structures

The Ogiek people of Kenya offer another example of radical democracy in negotiation with state structures. After decades of marginalization and dispossession, the Ogiek brought their case to the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights, which in 2017 recognized their rights to ancestral lands and self-governance. This legal victory illustrates how Indigenous communities can use state and supra-state institutions to expand democratic horizons. The Ogiek's pursuit of land restitution is not simply about reclaiming territory—it is about reasserting collective decision-making and ecological stewardship as democratic practices that the state must accommodate.

In Myanmar, the establishment of the Salween Peace Park by Karen communities further exemplifies how radical democratic initiatives can cooperate with or pressure states. The Peace Park is a community-led project to protect forests, uphold Indigenous governance, and ensure peace in a war-torn region. While it asserts autonomy from the central state, it also engages with international frameworks and seeks recognition from state authorities. This balancing act illustrates how radical democracy can carve out spaces of sovereignty while still negotiating with states to secure protection, legitimacy, and resources.

Michelle Maloney

Earth lawyer and advocate for Earth-centred governance

Mary Graham

political scientist, philosopher and Indigenous knowledge holder.

Waterfall in Tamborine Mountain, Queensland (Australia)
Source: Silva Vaughan-Jones

Place-based, Earth-centred governance in Australia

"We believe that the ancient and ongoing governance systems of the Aboriginal Peoples of Australia offer an important guide for rethinking and reshaping ecological custodianship – and broader societal governance - across our precious continent"

As communities around the world work to protect their homes, traditional lands and ecosystems in the face of escalating climate change and biodiversity loss, many people in Western societies are looking for new modes of governance to inspire and guide their actions. In Australia, where British colonisation imposed the English legal system across the continent since 1788, the past few decades have seen rising interest in Indigenous knowledge systems and bioregional approaches to ecological restoration and social justice.

In this essay, we discuss how our organizations – Future Dreaming, an Indigenous and non-Indigenous partnership organization[1], and the Australian Earth Laws Alliance (AELA)[2] – collaborate to promote ecocentric bioregional initiatives that follow the leadership of Indigenous governance systems in Australia. After defining key elements of 'bioregionalism' and 'bioregioning', we introduce the core principles of the governance systems created by the Indigenous Peoples of the continent now known as Australia. We suggest that these governance systems can be seen, in Western terms, as some of the oldest 'bioregional' governance structures in the world, and they can provide important leadership and guidance to others exploring bioregional approaches. Finally, we briefly introduce an approach used by AELA called 'Greenprints', which aims to bridge different cultural approaches to bioregional governance in Australia, and assist Western practitioners to engage in a deeper understanding of Earth-centred governance.

What do we mean by 'Bioregionalism'?

Western concepts of bioregionalism were popularised in the USA in the 1970s with the work of Peter Berg and Raymond Dasmann[3]. Berg and Dasmann highlighted the disconnect between Western societies and the natural world, and they explored the potential of (re)connecting modern people and their identities, political, social and cultural life to the features and boundaries of nature. In their work, they touched on two important issues: (i) the biophysical realities, constraints and resources of the geographical terrain that people live in, and (ii) the 'terrain of consciousness', meaning the way humans perceive and see patterns, connections and themselves in the landscape. Many other writers and thinkers have further enriched 'bioregionalism' literature, and in a 2023 paper, Hubbard and Wearne (et al)[4] conducted a helpful review of the origins and re-emergence of diverse practices relating to bioregionalism. They suggest that "bioregional thought is shifting from a static 'ism' into a careful and active engagement with usefully fuzzy concepts that ask how best to live on Earth". They invite people to consider '*bioregioning*' as a term that 'turns concepts about ecological boundaries, scales and socio-cultural re-inhabitation' into deliberative, ongoing discussions and initiatives.

AELA sees bioregional frameworks and 'bioregioning' as important concepts for building Earth-centred governance, especially in Western countries such as Australia. As noted by many writers – including Thomas Berry whose work on 'Earth jurisprudence'[5] inspired the formation of AELA – current Western law and governance is dominated by human-centred, growth-focused and top-down decision making, that perpetuates the disconnection between people and the biophysical realities of the living world upon which we depend. This is certainly the case in Australia, where decision making about land use, biodiversity and environmental protection is governed by top-down structures at the State and Federal levels, not at the local or bioregional level.

For AELA and Future Dreaming, we find that using the framing of 'bioregional governance' invites people from Western cultural traditions to question and more fully understand the dominant paradigm of Australian law and governance, which is disconnected from biophysical realities. It can then catalyse a search for new ways to connect with, and care for, the lands, waters, geography, plants and animals of local places, and also provides a useful 'bridge' to support further understanding by Western Peoples about the deep, rich, metaphysical nature of Indigenous governance systems.

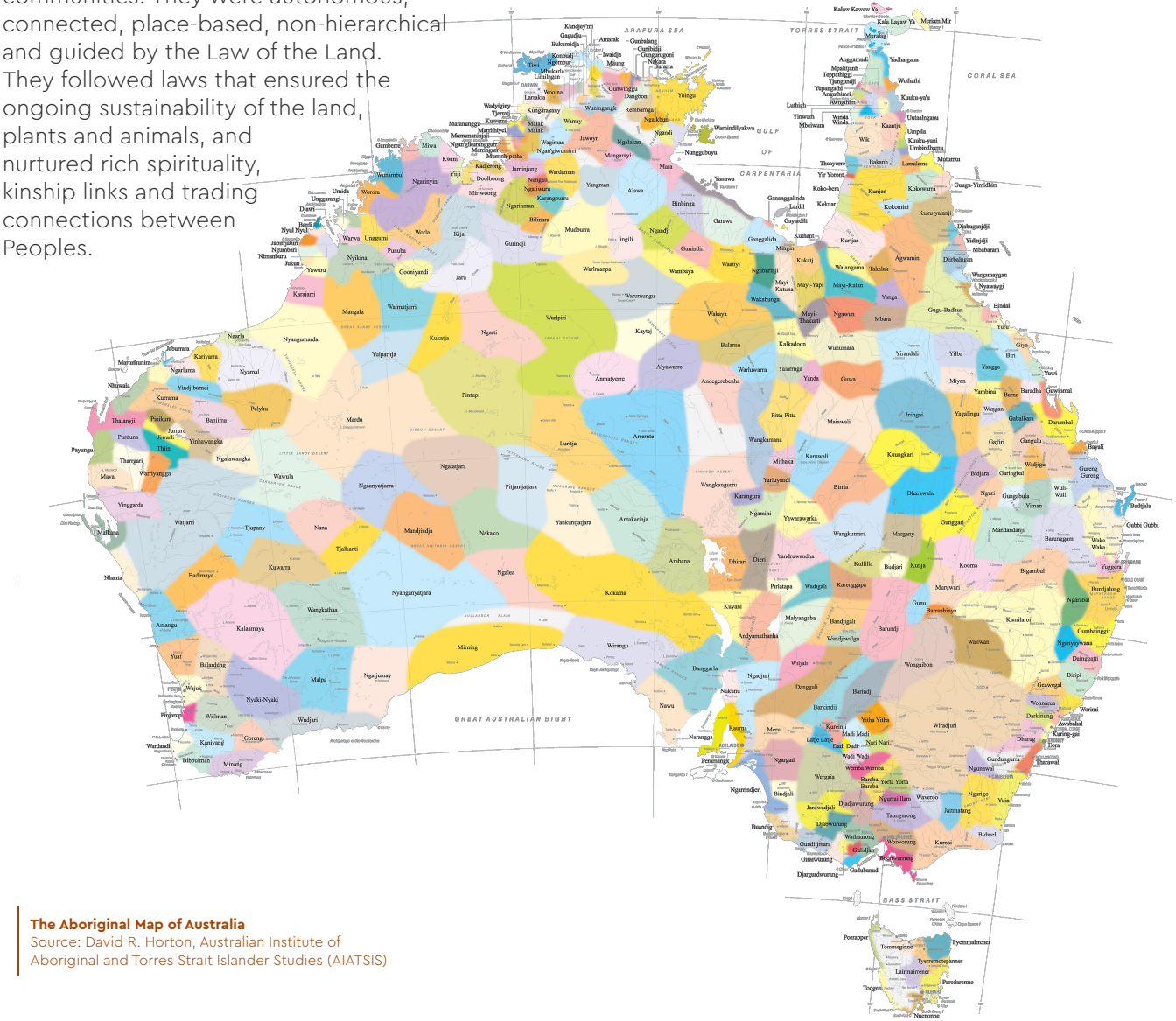
Aboriginal Governance

The Indigenous or 'Aboriginal' Peoples of Australia[6] are one of the oldest cultures and societies in the world. Aboriginal Peoples are known to have occupied mainland Australia for at least 65,000 years, and it is widely accepted that this predates the modern human settlement of Europe and the Americas.[7] As such an old culture, that lived successfully within the bounds of the ecological systems they were

part of for so many millennia, we feel they have much to share with others searching for ways to create sustainable human communities in the 21st Century.

Prior to colonisation by the British Empire in 1788, the continent now known as Australia was governed by hundreds of Aboriginal communities. They were autonomous, connected, place-based, non-hierarchical and guided by the Law of the Land. They followed laws that ensured the ongoing sustainability of the land, plants and animals, and nurtured rich spirituality, kinship links and trading connections between Peoples.

The Aboriginal Map of Australia[8] is very helpful for building understanding about how Aboriginal Peoples governed their societies, and the wider continent. The map is both a language map, and a governance map, as it shows the entire continent covered in a 'patchwork quilt' of connected communities with bio-cultural boundaries.



The Aboriginal Map of Australia
Source: David R. Horton, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS)

Within these communities, Australian Aboriginal people found order and security in the development of a system of co-existence with the natural environment and other living beings that foregrounds 'relationality' rather than 'survivalism'. Relationality literally means 'concerning the way in which two or more people or things are connected'.[9] Aboriginal relationality is an elaborate, complex and refined system of social, moral, spiritual and community connections, rules and obligations that provides an ordered universe and governance system for people.

This deep understanding of the relationality and interconnectedness of all things is a fundamental characteristic of Aboriginal Peoples' worldview. Within this understanding is the template for human society itself. In Aboriginal societies, the *primary relationship* is between people and land (this conjunction is termed 'Country'[10] in Aboriginal English). Relationships between people are always contingent/built upon the relationship between people and land. When communicating these relationships with non-Aboriginal people, many Aboriginal knowledge holders refer to the concept of *'First Laws/Second Laws'*.[11]

First Laws are the foundational laws and rules about how to live with and Care for Country (a community's land/traditional estate/ bioregion). These First Laws emerged from the deep understanding that Aboriginal People developed about their Country – their unique ecosystems and local places – over millennia of observation, practice and spirituality. Second laws are the rules for living together with other human beings, which are guided by the template of First Laws.

So while Aboriginal Peoples are connected across the continent through kinship and they share similar foundational worldviews, *the relationality that guides the law/lore for each Aboriginal community is created by the relationship people have with their specific, unique, places or 'Country'*. In Western terms, Aboriginal Australian Peoples created place-specific, ecologically based laws for their Country and communities.

Greenprints – Rethinking Governance In Modern Australia

While Aboriginal Peoples' systems of law and governance have been interrupted by British colonisation since 1788, many of the ancient governance systems are still in place and many others are being restored where colonial interruptions have been significant.

We believe that the ancient and ongoing governance systems of the Aboriginal Peoples of Australia offer an important guide for rethinking and reshaping ecological custodianship – and broader societal governance – across our precious continent. The work that we are doing through Future Dreaming and AELA, aims to promote understanding about Aboriginal Australian Peoples' culture and governance systems – both to increase respect and understanding by non-Indigenous Australians about Aboriginal culture and law, and also to assist non-Indigenous Peoples to develop more effective ecological custodianship and social justice initiatives.

Through AELA's 'Greenprints' program[12], we use a bioregional approach to encourage Western people who are working on sustainability,

climate change and/or 'regenerative' transitions, to connect their work deeply to place and to the unique ecosystems they are based in. We tend to find that some non-Indigenous practitioners focus on the local social justice and economic aspects of their transition work, without fully connecting these issues to a deep understanding of the unique qualities, guidance and ecological limits of their living bioregions. Greenprints invites Western practitioners to learn about and understand the foundations of their local ecosystems, catchments and bioregions *first*, then build an analysis of their current economic and social issues, so that systems change can be created that benefits and fits within their unique, specific ecological boundaries. Greenprints also advocates for 'fractal governance' which enables people to understand how governance within local and bioregional ecosystems, can fit within the larger patterns of ecoregions and the Earth system (including Planetary Boundaries), and how they can connect local and international ecological care.

Connecting bioregional governance with the Aboriginal Australian Relationist Ethos – and 'First Laws' – has much to offer modern Australian governance, as we grapple with the myriad of environmental and social justice problems we all face today. We look forward to continuing our work and exploring collaborative partnerships with others who are also exploring bioregional initiatives around the world ■
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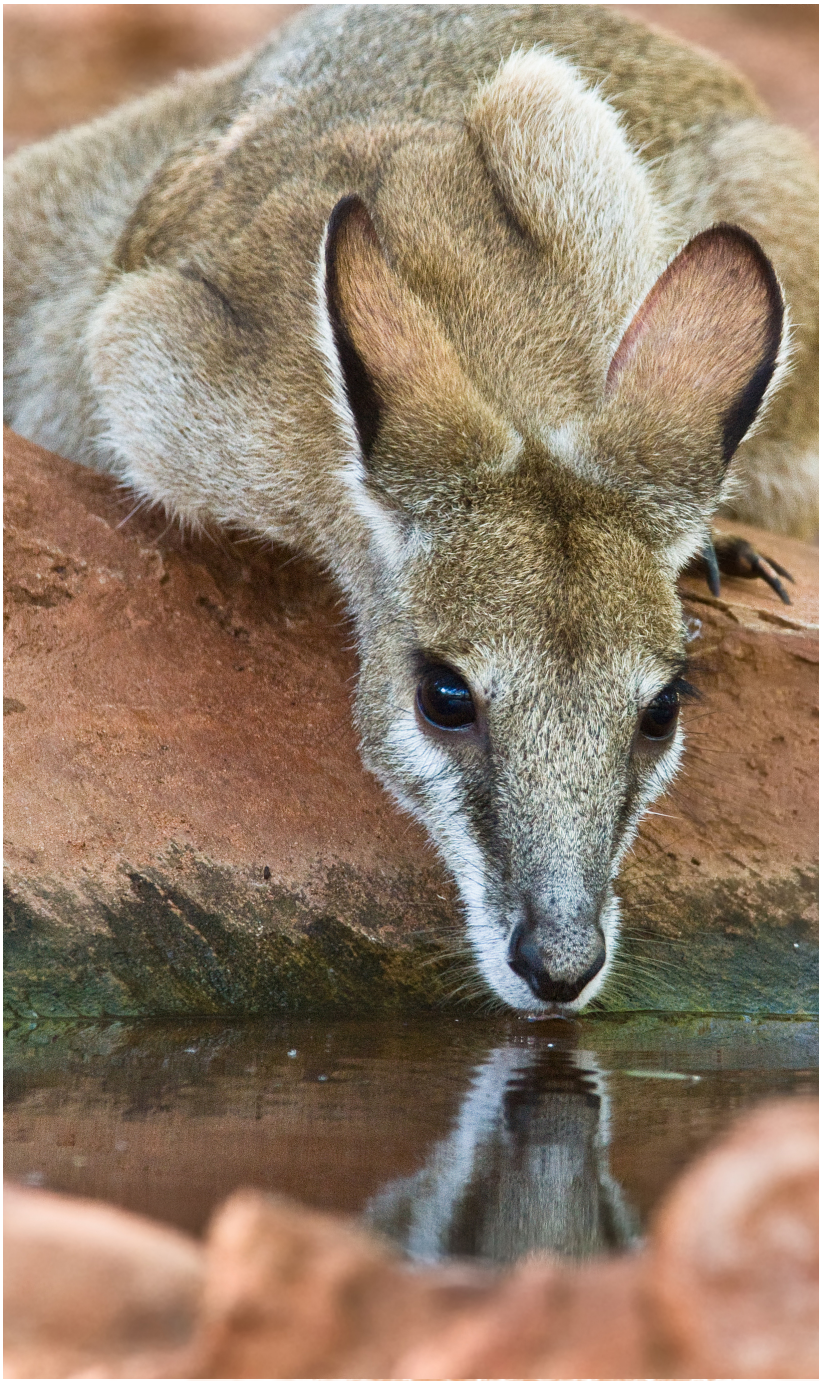
Female Agile Wallaby drinking from a rock pool in the evening light, Broom WA. Australia.
Source: Silva Vaughan-Jones



Notes

[1] Future Dreaming is a not-for-profit organization created by Indigenous and non-Indigenous partners in Australia, to share cross cultural ecological knowledge – www.futuredreaming.org.au

[2] The Australian Earth Laws Alliance (AELA) is a not-for-profit organization whose aim is to increase the understanding and practical implementation of Earth jurisprudence/Earth-centred governance – www.earthlaws.org.au

[3] Berg, P., & Dasmann, R. (2015). Reinhabiting California. In C. Glotfelty & E. Quesnel (Eds.), The biosphere and the bioregion: Essential writings of Peter Berg (pp. 61–63). Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group. Originally published (1977). The Ecologist, 7(10), 399–401.

[4] Hubbard, E., Wearne, S., Jónás, K., Norton, J., & Wilke, M. (2023). Where are you at? Re-engaging bioregional ideas and what they offer geography. Geography Compass, e12722. https://doi. org/10.1111/gec3.12722

[5] Earth jurisprudence is a call for Earth-centred law and governance to guide modern industrial societies towards a way of being that is in harmony with, and supports rather than destroys, the living world. See Berry,T. (1999) 'The Great Work: Our Way Into the Future"

[6] The 'labelling' of Indigenous Peoples is problematic. Some terms are offensive to some people, and in Australia different people prefer different terms to describe their cultural connections. In this essay we introduced the essay with the word 'Indigenous' because people from around the world are familiar with this word. Further into the essay, we refer specifically to 'Aboriginal Peoples' and 'Aboriginal Australians' because these are terms preferred by Mary.

[7] National Museum Australia, please this webpage – https://www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/resources/evidence-of-first-people

[8] This map can be viewed on the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) website here: https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/map-indigenous-australia

[9] Oxford Reference, https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100412539

[10] Graham, M. (1999) 'Some thoughts about the philosophical underpinnings of Aboriginal Worldviews' in Worldviews: Environment, Culture, Religion 3 (2) pp. 105–118

[11] Martuwarra RiverofLife, Poelina, A., Bagnall, D. and Lim, M. (2020) 'Recognising the Martuwarra's First Law Right to Life as an Ancestral Being', Transnational Environmental Law, 9:3, pp. 541–568

[12] See the Greenprints website for more details: https://www.greenprints.org.au

Further explorations

Article by Michelle Maloney: *https://evo.re/rd10401*

Podcast by Michelle Maloney: *https://evo.re/rd10402*

Indigenous philosophy and 'Relationist Economics' with Mary Graham: *https://evo.re/rd10403*

Aboriginal Political Philosophy: A Conversation with Mary Graham & Morgan Brigg: *https://evo.re/rd10404*

Stability, security and survival: a conversation with Mary Graham: *https://evo.re/rd10405*

Daniel M. Kobei

Founder and Executive Director of the Ogiek Peoples' Development Program (OPDP)

Protecting the rights of Indigenous Peoples in Voluntary Isolation and Initial contact.
#Rememberourroots
Our Lands
Our rights
Our future.
The Mau forest is our pride, our home and our heartbeat.
Implement the court decisions on our land rights.
#Land_Reparations
#Rememberourroots

The Ogiek Community during the International Day of the Indigenous People

The Ogiek's Struggle for Autonomy and Redefining Democracy in Kenya's Mau Forest

The Ogiek's struggle for autonomy primarily revolved around their land rights and legal recognition of customary laws. Therefore, their quest for autonomy intersects with dimensions of political and economic democracy in several ways. The Ogiek's fight for land rights and recognition challenges conventional power structures where indigenous communities are often marginalized in decision-making processes.

The Ogiek community[1], is an indigenous with an approximate population of 52,000[2] people according to the 2019 Kenyan National Census report. This community has been living in six counties (Narok, Nakuru, Kericho, Uasin-Gishu, Nandi and Baringo) within Mau Forest complex. They have for long traditionally managed their environment with intricate knowledge of flora and fauna, which has played a crucial role in preserving the forest's ecological balance. The Ogiek people have historically lived in harmony with the Mau Forest complex in Kenya, relying on the forest for sustenance, cultural practices, and spiritual beliefs[3]. Their journey intertwines with broader questions of political and economic democracy, offering insights into alternative power dynamics and expanded notions of democracy beyond human realms.

However, their traditional way of life has been increasingly threatened by external forces such as perennial evictions[4] having them forcefully evicted from their ancestral lands due to forced climate change solutions over their indigenous rights and are presumed to be prompted by the active carbon markets/carbon credits evolving business. For instance, the evictions that took place in November, 2023 left some significant losses to the community, not limited to the loss of their land. In the area of Sasimwani Narok County, over 200 families[5] were displaced from their homes, over 42 children have currently not been going to school because all of them were burnt, the community lost their livelihoods such as small crop farming, beekeeping and loss of their valuable cultural artefacts among others. This exemplifies a profound struggle for autonomy and recognition within the context of democracy and legal rights.

Land rights are a foundation for political and social empowerment, and legal recognition of their land rights will offer the Ogiek community protection against forced evictions and land grabs. This stability allows the Ogiek to invest in long-term economic activities without the constant threat of displacement. The perennial evictions and pressures have instead marginalized the Ogiek, pushing them to the fringes of society and endangering their cultural heritage and livelihoods. In recent decades, the Ogiek Peoples' Development Program (OPDP) has been at the forefront of legal battles to secure the communities' ancestral land, which has often been targeted for conservation or commercial purposes by external entities. This struggle culminated in significant legal victories: the legal victory judgement on merits in May 2017[6] and the subsequent victory on the reparation ruling[7] in June 2022 at the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights[8] in Arusha, Tanzania.

The Ogiek's struggle for autonomy primarily revolved around their land rights and legal recognition of customary laws. Therefore, their quest for autonomy intersects with dimensions of political and economic democracy in several ways. The Ogiek's fight for land rights and recognition challenges conventional power structures where indigenous communities are often marginalized in decision-making processes. For instance, in Kenya, the Ogiek community has no significant number of representatives holding Government positions and who can participate more effectively in decision-making processes that affect their lives, asserting their autonomy and influencing policies in their favour. This means that the only avenue to air out their grievances is through collective advocacy efforts within the community. The Ogiek make decisions in a three tier governance Elders, Women and youth structure, however traditional way of decision making was through the Clan elders which for the Ogiek council of elders, herewith Gotoop Sogot Council of elders. In the contemporary period women are now involved unlike before, similarly with the youths. They all subscribe to the Ogiek Council of elders as the supreme body.

Ogiek Peoples' Development Program (OPDP)[9] has greatly helped the community to underscore the importance of inclusive democracy that respects and integrates diverse cultural perspectives and governance systems. Through OPDP the community registered the Council of Elders named 'Gotoop Sogoot Council' in 2019. The Council of Elders have been actively engaging the government to push for the implementation of the African Court Judgement, which reflects the struggle as a shift towards notions of 'power-with' and 'power-to' rather than 'power-over'. The Ogiek Council of Elders have also submitted their historical land injustices to National Land Commission (NLC) and got their determination[10] making recommendations to the Ministry of land to allocate land to the Ogiek community of Mau forest complex. Their collective action and advocacy are rooted in community solidarity and self-determination, challenging hierarchical power structures imposed by colonial legacies and modern state policies.

The Ogiek's economic autonomy is also deeply connected to their land rights, considering that their livelihoods are more dependent on their distinct territories. Securing land rights allows the Ogiek to preserve their cultural heritage and traditional knowledge systems, which are often intertwined with their economic practices. This cultural

continuity supports intergenerational learning and maintains the community's identity. By securing legal recognition of their lands, they regain control over resources crucial for their livelihoods, such as honey harvesting, hunting and indigenous medicinal plants. This autonomy challenges dominant economic models that prioritize profit over sustainability and community well-being while upholding ecological knowledge which also promotes sustainable resource management practices.

By recognizing their land rights, these practices can be upheld and serve as models for sustainable development, countering the environmental degradation often associated with profit-driven exploitation such as the looming carbon markets business. Access to their ancestral lands also ensures food security for these communities, enabling them to continue with traditional farming that maintains their indigenous food systems, beekeeping and hunting practices that provide diverse and nutritious food sources, reducing dependency on external food systems.

With control over their lands, the Ogiek community can explore better and more diverse economic opportunities, such as eco-tourism, sustainable forestry, and the sale of traditional crafts and products. This diversification can provide resilience against economic shocks and external market fluctuations.

Indigenous land management practices can also play a significant role in climate change mitigation, enhancing biodiversity, adaptation, cutting on carbon and reducing greenhouse gas emissions and greatly aligning with global climate goals and potentially attracting support and funding for climate resilience projects. By securing land rights, the Ogiek can protect their ecosystems from destructive activities like deforestation, contributing to global biodiversity conservation efforts. This will enable them to maintain their traditional medicinal practices, which are integral to their health and well-being. This autonomy over healthcare can reduce reliance on conventional medicinal systems and preserve valuable indigenous medicinal knowledge.

The Ogiek elders setting up Mabwaita Ogiek Shrine

With secure land rights, the Ogiek can develop educational programs that incorporate traditional knowledge with modern skills, fostering a well-rounded development that supports both cultural preservation and economic growth.

The Ogiek experience demonstrates how political and economic democracy are intertwined. Legal recognition of their land rights not only empowers them politically but also economically, allowing them to sustain their traditional practices and economic activities without external interference. The Ogiek's deep connection to their ancestral lands emphasizes the importance of environmental democracy, where ecosystems have intrinsic value, and communities are stewards rather than exploiters. Currently, the Ogiek community, through OPDP are actively taking part in restoration efforts through the growing of Indigenous trees within their territories. Recognizing that indigenous rights intersect with broader struggles for human and environmental rights, it then necessitates a holistic approach to democracy that acknowledges and respects diverse forms of knowledge and governance.

Herbalist Rusia at the Ogiek Hebarium

The Ogiek community's struggle for autonomy and recognition of customary laws illuminates profound insights into autonomy, democracy, and power dynamics. Their journey underscores the transformative potential of 'power-with' and 'power-to' paradigms, challenging conventional notions of political and economic democracy. By securing legal rights to their ancestral lands, the Ogiek community through OPDP, is reclaiming their autonomy and revitalizing their cultural heritage1 in ways that resonate globally, offering lessons for envisioning a more inclusive and sustainable future where democracy expands beyond human boundaries.

The Ogiek community, through the cultural Centre have created a home for cultural growth of Ogiek, they have established the only Ogiek Museum in Kenya, where the Ogiek children have the opportunity to engage with Ogiek elders and learn the use of Ogiek artefacts. The Centre is endowed with the scenery of indigenous trees and an excellent landscape and Ogiek cultural village, within the village is the only Ogiek herbarium. The Centre also serves as a learning centre for the Ogiek for both language and adult education, most Ogiek around the Nkareta area of Narok County. The Profound knowledge of Ogiek women in herbal and traditional medicine is one sector where promotion of Ogiek culture has excelled

The resilience of the Ogiek struggle for their land rights and natural resources has not only created international outcry through their partners and indigenous community, it has also brought new energy of young people and strong Ogiek women power. Indeed, the community is not relenting but instead always advocating for their rights locally, regionally and internationally. Mau remains their cradle home as they resonate well with the spirit of their ancestors.

Notes

[1]: Pg 3. of the Ogiek community Bio-cultural Protocol 3rd Edition. Available on: https://ogiekpeoples.org/download/ogiek-community-bio-cultural-protocol

[2]: Volume IV – Kenya Population CHC-2019. Available on: https://www.knbs.or.ke/download/2019-kenya-population-and-housing-census-volume-iv-distribution-of-population-by-socio-economic-characteristics/

[3]: Ogiek Community Video on Culture. Available on: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LeSYu0yYfcI

[4]: BBC News coverage on the evictions at Sasimwani in November 2023. Available on: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-67352067

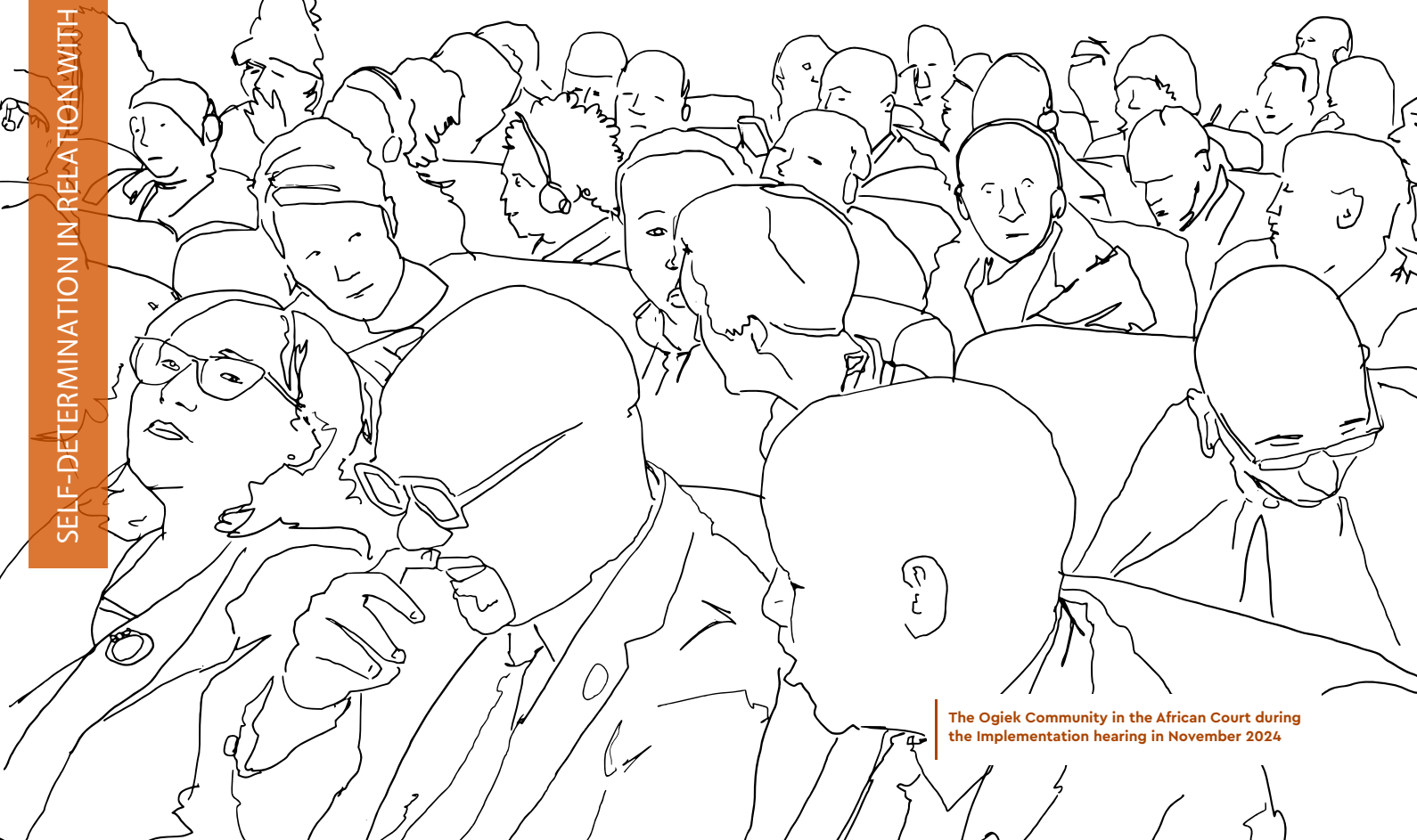
[5]: Evictions-in-sasimwani. Available on: https://www.kbc.co.ke/ogiek-community-in-narok-decries-latest-evictions-in-sasimwani/

[6]: Africa court ruling on the Ogiek case. Available on: https://ogiekpeoples.org/download/african-court-ruling-on-the-ogiek-case

[7]: On the Ogiek reparation case. Available on: https://ogiekpeoples.org/download/african-court-judgment-on-the-ogiek-reparation-case

[8]: See: https://www.african-court.org/wpafc/

[9]: See: http://www.ogiekpeoples.org



The Ogiek Community in the African Court during the Implementation hearing in November 2024

[10]: Determination of the Ogiek Historical Land Injustices. Available on: https://landcommission.go.ke/download/final-determination-ogiek-community-of-mau-forest-complex-march-2024–2

[11]: Restoration Efforts by the Ogiek community through OPDP. Available on: https://x.com/OgiekPeoples/status/1782311802119844095

[12]: The Launch of the Ogiek Cultural Center, as a means of reviving the Ogiek Culture. Available on: https://medium.com/@landbodyecologies/ogiek-peoples-development-program-opens-cultural-centre-in-kenya-a0fab36884f0

Further explorations

Articles

Kenya's Ogiek celebrate anniversary of landmark rights ruling: *https://evo.re/rd10501*

Ogiek profile at Survival: *https://evo.re/rd10502*

Videos

Kenya's indigenous Ogiek evicted from ancestral lands for carbon credits: *https://evo.re/rd10503*

Kenya's Ogiek people battle to reclaim ancestral land: *https://evo.re/rd10504*

The Ogiek Story: Community-led conservation in Mount Elgon, Kenya: *https://evo.re/rd10505*

Paul Sein Twa

Co-founder and Director of the Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN)

Community gathering as part of collective decision making

The Salween Peace Park: An Indigenous Karen Approach to Democracy and Representation in Myanmar

We are at a conjunctural point in human history. The future of our species in an increasingly erratic Climate is dependent on the decision-making of peoples and leaders across the Globe. There must be a willingness to aspire to a deeper reformulation of the way that we govern, it is time for a diversity of voices in our democracies. The Salween Peace Park challenges the way that power is shared in Myanmar.

Democratic turmoil was rife in the build-up to Myanmar's 2020 elections. Military-backed parties claimed widespread voter fraud and vote fixing, accusing the incumbent National League for Democracy (NLD) of using the Coronavirus Pandemic to steal the elections. The subsequent February 2021 Military Coup brought a swift end to Myanmar's brief 10-year experiment with democracy, plunging the nation into disarray as outraged citizens nationwide downed tools and joined the Civil Disobedience Movement. In South-Eastern Myanmar, in Karen controlled territories, the 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement crumbled and armed conflict once again erupted. At present, there are more than one million displaced people[1] across Kawthoolei[2], many of whom are taking shelter in the forests and mountains that the Karen people have stewarded for generations.

The Coup, while causing an inexcusable tide of suffering across the country, has also created opportunity. Communities long subjugated by Myanmar's Central powers are pursuing their own forms of representative governance. Now, in a time bereft of legitimate Central Government, Community-led institutions can demonstrate a clear and positive path towards just representation in a potential future Federal Myanmar. This paper will look at one of these institutions, known as the Salween Peace Park.

Representation in Myanmar – For the few

Representation has been a consistent issue in Myanmar for many generations. For centuries, the nation was ruled by various feudal kingdoms, then by a dogmatic British colonial authority that subsumed Myanmar into British India. Independence from British Rule in 1948 was followed by decades of authoritarianism. In 2010, the nation's first democratic elections after 50 years of military dictatorship initiated a democratic 'reform period', kick-started by the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP). This quasi-civilian party acted as the 'legitimate' arms of the Burmese Military. While in office the USDP pursued an agenda pantomiming Western-inspired Liberal Democratic reforms. In reality, the USDP predominantly passed legislation that ensured the Government's continued monopoly over land, forest, and all natural resources in the country and entrenched the power of the military within any potential future democratic state. When the NLD took power in 2016, they found themselves shackled not only by the restrictions put in place by the USDP, but also by their own ambitions. Aung San Suu Kyi's focus on economic growth and 'Modernisation' above all else, coupled with the military-penned 2008 Constitution and a Legal Framework that ignores Ethnic and Indigenous rights, only deepened the many political rifts in a nation already fractured by one of the world's longest ongoing Civil Wars.

For many, the USDP and NLD periods were merely another incarnation of Burman Supremacy, with Ethnic rights and voices entirely sidelined and new laws and policies focused on the exploitation of natural resources in Ethnic territories. Controversial rulings around Citizenship and Identity Documents disenfranchised countless voters, especially in Ethnic communities. Compounding this 'Ethnic Issues' – or the needs of Myanmar's Ethnic Peoples – were considered part of the Peace Process, and under the purview of the Military. This meant that any new policies passed by the Central Government were solely informed by the needs of the Burman majority. Ethnic and Indigenous communities were thus de facto excluded from Myanmar's new democracy purely because of our status as 'Ethnic'.

The SPP's institutions are founded upon the needs and worldview of Indigenous Karen communities, and thus, decision-making as a whole is built upon holistic approaches to Nature.

The Salween Peace Park – Indigenous Representation in Action

Faced with continuous exclusion from politics at National level, and not seeing themselves represented in Myanmar's new policies and reforms, Karen communities in Kawthoolei's Mutraw District have paved their own path to representation. Launched in December of 2018, the Salween Peace Park (SPP) is an Indigenous-led culture and nature conservation area, operating under a popularly elected 137-member General Assembly and guided by Karen Indigenous Knowledge and culture. The Salween Peace Park was declared after five years of community consultations and a popular referendum. Covering 6700 km2, the SPP contains 294 customary Kaw territories, 43 Community Forests, 6 Wildlife Sanctuaries, and 9 Reserved Forest areas. Founded

upon the three pillars of peace and self-determination, environmental integrity, and cultural survival, the SPP seeks to find a way to bring key lessons from the indigenous Karen way of life to a landscape-scale. Through this, the SPP's stakeholders aim to realise the community's vision for a peaceful future, where people can live in harmony with Nature and the environment can remain healthy for future generations .

Unlike most forms of governance, representation in the SPP comes from the ground upwards; the key decision-makers and leaders in the Park are the community themselves. The Kaw customary territory is the locus of governance from which the direction and aims of the SPP flow. The SPP's institutions are founded upon the needs and worldview of Indigenous Karen communities, and thus, decision-making as a whole is built upon holistic approaches to Nature. Traditional leaders are brought on as advisors to help the development of policies and strategy. By building democracy and governance on an Indigenous foundation, the SPP establishes a form of democracy that not only represents Karen indigenous communities but also gives voice to the more-than-human entities that are intricately woven throughout Karen culture. These entities are represented through the traditions and taboos of each Kaw territory, allowing for Governance that is flexible, adaptive and built heavily on local needs rather than national wants.

Youth members in traditional music celebration

A view of the Salween Peace Park

Tying this together is the General Assembly, which comprises representatives from the SPP's 35 Village Tracts, the Karen National Union (KNU), and Karen Civil Society. The GA manages six Working Groups that help information and strategy flow upwards from the Kaw. The General Assembly is both a forum for Community members to gather, share, and learn, and an amplifier for Community voices, aims, and needs. By operating on the principle of deliberative democracy, the General Assembly builds on the Indigenous Karen oral tradition, whereby local knowledge and taboos are passed down through stories and poetry. This makes governance more transparent and accessible, thus strengthening political engagement.

The election process for the General Assembly is conducted once every four years. Elections are held at Village Tract level, bringing together communities from each Village to vote for a Community representative within the General Assembly. Votes are cast anonymously at temporary polling stations. The elected members of the General Assembly then gather and vote to select the Governing Committee, the 11-member body that oversees the General Assembly. The General Assembly meets annually, with sub-meeting being held throughout the year. The Governing Committee also meets quarterly to share reports from their various visits to areas across the SPP and the key needs identified.

The SPP plays an important role when it comes to accountability. The de facto political authority across Kawthoolei is the KNU and in Mutraw District, even prior to the Coup, the KNU has been the primary provider of governmental services and institutions. To the majority of Mutraw's citizens the KNU is the government. In a move thus far unique in Myanmar, the KNU has not only formally recognised the SPP and its Charter, but has also integrated into the SPP's governing structure. This has established a hybrid form of governance that greatly reduces the gap between 'Citizens' and 'Government'. Community members are now on much more of a level playing field with the KNU, holding equal status within the General Assembly. This not only increases communication between communities and the KNU, but also strengthens communities' ability to challenge any actors within the KNU working against Community interests.

Through promoting political participation, strengthening community voices and rights, and instituting context-relevant safeguards, the SPP has already begun influencing the conduct and abuse of power in Myanmar. As an entity, the SPP stands as a direct counter to the Burmese Junta's continuing pursuit of Central Military-State Territorialisation. This takes a plurality of forms, but is most visible in the prevention of military-backed natural resource exploitation, and the halting of work on the proposed Hatgyi, Dagwin, and Weigyi Hydropower Dams. Community mobilization against these threats has not only predominantly brought them to a standstill, but has also further strengthened Indigenous Karen-led State Building. This has allowed the SPP to develop into a fledgling Radical Ecological Democracy.

Representation, Indigeneity, and Future Federalism in Myanmar

Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLCs) throughout the world recognize the voices of more-than-human entities in governance decisions.[3] This is not done by special decree, but is rather a component of many IPLCs culture and worldview. More-than-humans are a part of everyday society, with equal rights to political expression as humans. It has been argued that IPLCs live with a "bundle of responsibilities"[4] responsibility to future generations, responsibility to Nature, responsibilities to ancestors and more-than-human entities. These responsibilities are intertwined with rights, engendering a society in which the protection of Nature is innate, rather than something that comes with 'necessary sacrifices'.

There is empirical evidence that this has had a positive impact on the health of the planet. IPLCs territories cover an estimated 20% of the planet, the majority of them existing within zones of protracted armed conflict, and yet they are home to a significant proportion of the world's remaining biodiversity.[5] In a time of Global Climate Emergency it is clear that there is much to be learned from IPLCs, especially from how we approach Representation. And yet IPLC representation within 'mainstream' government remains so rare that it makes Global headlines when one of us is elected. Some countries offer special permissions or recognitions to IPLCs, or have integrated key International Declarations protecting IPs into governance. Communication remains a key challenge, though.

At National and International level, despite concerted efforts to improve communication and inclusivity, IPLCs and National Governments frequently 'talk past' each-other. There remains a fundamental difference between 'Western' and IPLC understandings of governance, representation, rights, 'development', and – most importantly – ownership. This is visible even in the language of Global Governance. IPLCs have to translate our culture, our Indigenous Knowledge, to fit the International Framework. We are 'Stewards' and 'Guardians', our livelihoods are 'Sustainable' and 'Climate-Resilient'. At the Global level, this is an imposed fee, the price to pay to be granted access and Representation, and it entrenches the gulf in the understanding of and meaningful engagement with IPLC Knowledge and rights.

We are at a conjunctural point in human history. The future of our species in an increasingly erratic Climate is dependent on the decision-making of peoples and leaders across the Globe. There must be a willingness to aspire to a deeper reformulation of the way that we govern, it is time for a diversity of voices in our democracies. The Salween Peace Park challenges the way that power is shared in Myanmar. By embracing Indigenous ontologies and more-than-human voices as a core component of governance Indigenous Karen communities are demonstrating a different path to Representation. The SPP is but one of many more radical approaches to democracy that IPLCs are exploring, each one offering us a chance to reverse the damage that decades of a gluttonous growth-driven mindset to governance have wrought. The path to change is being charted, it is up to us to follow it ■

Governing Committee, the 11-member body that oversees the General Assembly

Notes

[1] Kawthoolei-Displacement Overview Map August 2024, Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People

[2] The S'gaw Karen language name for the Karen national homeland

[3] Paul, Andrew & Roth, Robin & Moo, Saw. (2021). Relational ontology and more-than-human agency in Indigenous Karen conservation practice. Pacific Conservation Biology. 27. 10.1071/PC20016.

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[5] Even after armed conflict, the environmental quality of Indigenous Peoples' lands in biodiversity hotspots surpasses that of non-Indigenous lands, M. Beattie et al., Biological Conservation Volume 286 (110288). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biocon.2023.110288

Further explorations

Articles

ICCA resources: *https://evo.re/rd10601*

Earth Island article: *https://evo.re/rd10602*

Mongobay article: *https://evo.re/rd10603*

Videos

Salween Peace Park: *https://evo.re/rd10604*

Salween Peace Park 4th General Assembly: *https://evo.re/rd10605*

The Living Cultural Territory Sacred and Historical Sites in the Salween Peace Park: *https://evo.re/rd10606*

The concept of radical democracy invites us to return to the roots of political life. Etymologically, "radical" comes from the Latin radix, meaning root, suggesting a movement back to the source of power and vitality. In this sense, radicalizing democracy is not simply about extending modern institutions but about recovering its original meaning as a form of collective self-rule deeply tied to the land, community, and the more-than-human world. Traditional governance practices remind us that democracy was never solely a human invention but a way of harmonizing with the rhythms and forces of nature.

In many Indigenous and local traditions, governance emerges not from centralized authority but from the recognition of interdependence between people, ancestors, spirits, and ecosystems. The more-than-human plays a fundamental role in shaping political order, as rivers, mountains, and forests are often seen as subjects with agency rather than objects to be managed. This re-centering of democracy around ecological and spiritual relations opens a path to rethink politics as something grounded in reciprocity and care rather than domination and control.

The Kalasha community of the Hindu Kush in Pakistan exemplifies this rooted practice. Their governance is woven into rituals, myths, and collective assemblies that respect both human needs and ecological integrity. The Kalasha view forests, pastures, and rivers as sacred spaces, demanding protection rather than exploitation. Through community decision-making, they sustain a balance between survival and conservation, demonstrating that democracy becomes radical when it reclaims its original foundation: collective life in harmony with nature.

Conservation & recovery of traditional governance

In Uganda, the Bagungu community has advanced a similar vision by linking political action to the rights of nature. Struggles over land, forests, and water have led to innovative forms of governance that recognize ecosystems as legal and moral entities. By framing rivers and landscapes as rights-bearing subjects, these communities expand the boundaries of democracy beyond human society, creating a legal-political framework where nature is a participant in governance. Their practices challenge the anthropocentric assumptions of modern law and offer an ecological radicalization of democracy.

Taken together, the Kalasha in Pakistan and the Bagungu in Uganda illustrate that the radicalization of democracy also comes from returning to its roots: the land, the sacred, and the recovery of grounded experiences. By re-centering politics on ecological interdependence and traditional forms of governance, these communities propose a vision of democracy that transcends the state and modern law. In doing so, they remind us that genuine democracy grows not in parliaments but in forests, rivers, and communal assemblies where human life is inseparable from the vitality of nature.

Ajaz Ahmed

Forester and Ecosystem Restoration Specialist and
Member of the ICCA Consortium

Kalash women planting trees for forest restoration.

Heritage and Habitat: Indigenous Conservation Practices in Hindukush region, Chitral, Pakistan

As the world faces increasing environmental challenges, the wisdom embedded in these indigenous Conservation practices offers valuable lessons. They remind us that conservation is not merely a technical or scientific endeavor but a way of life that requires a deep connection to the land and a commitment to preserving it for future generations. The people of Chitral do not view themselves as separate from nature but as an integral part of it.

Chitral is the largest district in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, spanning a vast area of 14,850 square kilometers. Nestled in the remote Chitral region of the Hindu Kush Mountains, it's one of the most isolated corners of the Western Himalayas. With an elevation of 1,128 meters and a population of just over 57,157 (according to the 2023 Census), Chitral is a place where time seems to stand still, surrounded by majestic mountain passes, lush green valleys, and ancient glaciers that have carved these landscapes over centuries. Chitral sits at the foot of Tirich Mir, the highest peak in the Hindu Kush range, making it the northernmost district of Pakistan. The district shares its borders with Afghanistan's Kunar, Badakhshan, and Nuristan provinces to the north and west, Gilgit-Baltistan to the east, and Swat and Dir to the south. A narrow strip of the Wakhan Corridor separates Chitral from Tajikistan in the north, adding to its unique geographic and cultural significance. In Chitral, governance is a fascinating mix of old traditions and modern systems. Communities rely heavily on long-standing practices like the Sotsiri system, where elders mediate disputes and manage shared resources like forests and water.

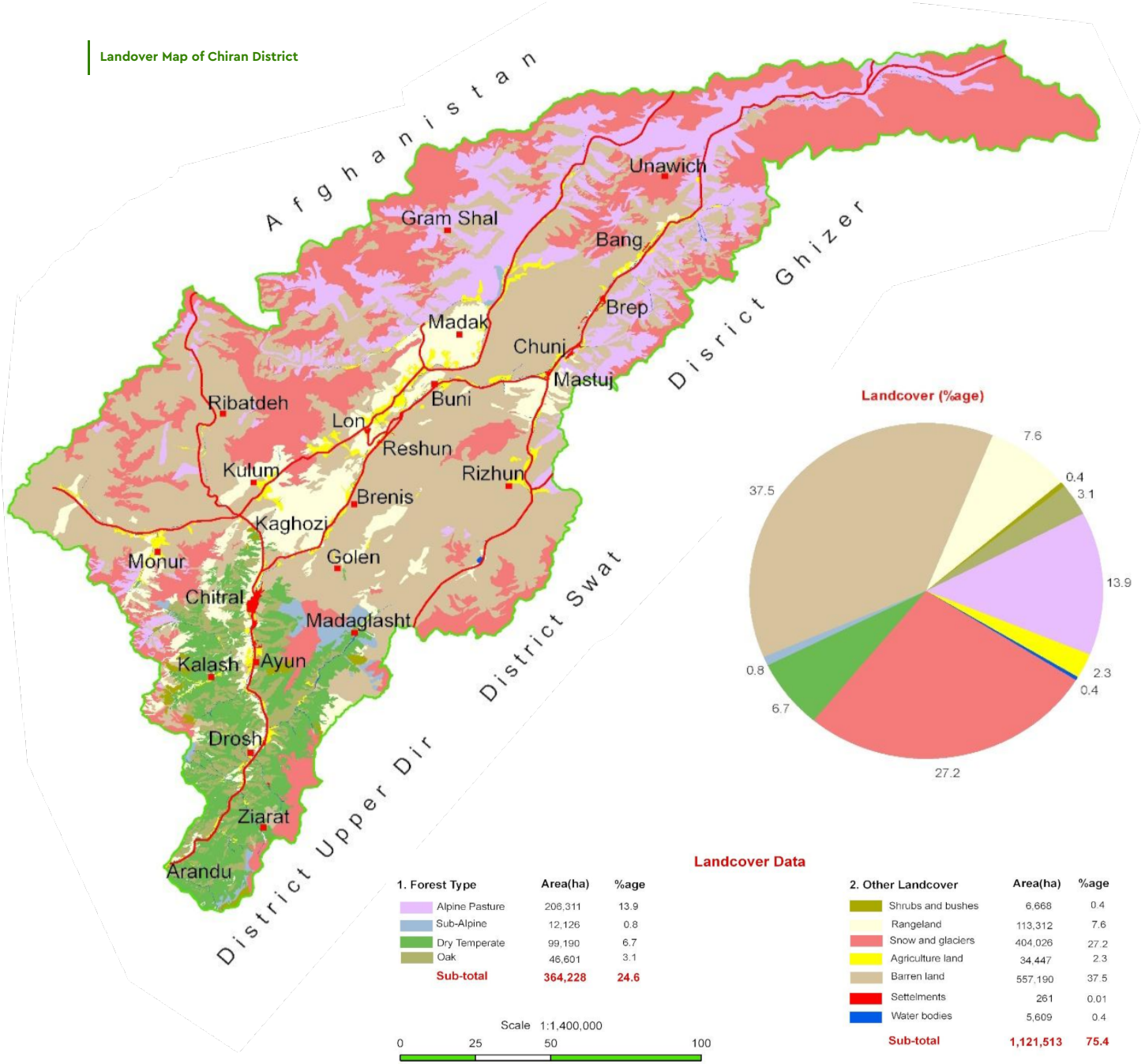
Similarly, in the Kalash Valleys, the Hujat system brings people together in community houses (Jastakhans) to resolve issues and make decisions that affect daily life. These traditional systems are now complemented by modern structures like village councils, introduced under Pakistan's laws. These councils tackle local development issues—schools, roads, healthcare—while ensuring conservation and cultural values remain central. Despite being part of Pakistan's legal framework, communities here enjoy considerable autonomy in managing their resources and preserving their way of life. For example, many conservation projects like forest conservation and wildlife conservation and management often originate from the grassroots level, with input from locals and support from different organizations. In essence, Chitral's governance combines the wisdom of the past with the tools of the present. It's a unique system where decisions about the environment, culture, and economy are made collectively, ensuring a balance between tradition and modern democracy.

Importance of indigenous conservation practices

Hindu Kush, the local communities have been living in harmony with nature for generations. Their way of life is deeply intertwined with the land, and this connection has given rise to unique conservation practices that are both practical and profoundly wise. These indigenous practices aren't just rules to follow —they are a way of life that reflects a deep respect for the environment. The people of Chitral have always known that their survival depends on the health of the forests, pastures, and rivers that surround them. This understanding has led to the development of practices that carefully balance human needs with the well-being of the natural world. For example, instead of overusing the land, these communities have learned to rotate their grazing areas, allowing pastures to recover and thrive. They've set aside entire areas for regeneration, letting nature take its course to heal and restore the environment. These practices are guided by a simple yet powerful principle: use only what you need and make sure that what you take can be replenished. What makes these practices even more remarkable is that they are community-driven.

Decisions about how to manage the land are made collectively, ensuring that everyone has a stake in the health of their environment. This sense of shared responsibility not only strengthens the bonds within the community but also ensures that conservation efforts are sustainable in the long run. These practices have helped maintain the region's biodiversity, protect against soil erosion, and ensure that water sources remain clean and plentiful. They've also fostered a strong sense of stewardship among the people, who see themselves as guardians of the land for future generations. In today's world, where environmental challenges are becoming increasingly complex, there's a lot to learn from the indigenous conservation practices of Chitral. These practices remind us that conservation isn't just about protecting nature—it's about understanding our place in the natural world and living in a way that honors and preserves it. The people of Chitral don't see themselves as separate from nature but as a part of it. This perspective is at the heart of their conservation efforts and is a lesson for all of us. In a time when the planet is under threat, their way of life offers a blueprint for how we can live more sustainably and in harmony with the Earth.

Landover Map of Chiran District



Landcover Data

1. Forest Type	Area(ha)	%age
Alpine Pasture	206,311	13.9
Sub-Alpine	12,126	0.8
Dry Temperate	99,190	6.7
Oak	46,601	3.1
Sub-total	**364,228**	**24.6**

2. Other Landcover	Area(ha)	%age
Shrubs and bushes	6,668	0.4
Rangeland	113,312	7.6
Snow and glaciers	404,026	27.2
Agriculture land	34,447	2.3
Barren land	557,190	37.5
Settelments	261	0.01
Water bodies	5,609	0.4
Sub-total	**1,121,513**	**75.4**
Grand-total	**1,485,741**	**100**

1. Sotsiri: Collective Grazing for Resource Management

One of the most vital practices in this region is Sotsiri, a traditional system of collective grazing that plays a crucial role in managing and conserving rangelands and pasture resources. Livestock, particularly goats and sheep, are central to the livelihoods of these mountain communities, considered lifelines by the locals. The Sotsiri system is designed to minimize individual grazing efforts and reduce the overall strain on natural resources. In this system, grazing responsibilities rotate among households at the village or Gram level. Each household takes turns caring for the entire community's livestock for a day. Typically, two people from a household manage a flock of about 200 sheep and goats, guiding them through the rangelands. If a household is unable to fulfill its duties due to unavoidable circumstances, such as a death in the family or an emergency, the next neighbor automatically steps in. Sotsiri not only reduces the workload on individual families but also helps in preventing overgrazing and resource depletion. If a grazing animal is lost or injured, the herders are only required to provide proof, such as the meat, skin, or horns of the animal, rather than compensating for the full loss. This system fosters a strong sense of community and shared responsibility for working together for resource conservation and management,

Birir, one of the three valleys in Kalash

2. Dane: Assisted Natural Regeneration

Dane is another indigenous practice that reflects the community's commitment to resource conservation. This system focuses on the natural regeneration of degraded and deforested areas, such as pastures, rangelands, and communal oak forests. Under the Dane system, a specific area is declared a protected zone for a set period, typically ranging from 5 to 10 years. During this time, the area is shielded from excessive grazing, timber collection, and other forms of exploitation, allowing the natural vegetation to recover. The Aouray Committee, which oversees the Dane system, is typically composed of 11 to 15 members, reflecting the diverse representation within the community. Here is the usual composition and their roles:

Composition

Age Groups:

- Members range in age from 26 to 60 years, ensuring representation across generations.
- Younger members (26–40 years) often contribute energy and active participation in enforcement and monitoring.
- Older members (41–60 years) bring wisdom, experience, and social influence to guide decision-making.

Gender Representation:

- The committee usually includes three women, reflecting efforts to include gender diversity in decision-making.
- Women often represent community perspectives on resource use and conservation, especially concerning household needs and sustainable practices.

Social Roles:

- Members are drawn from within the village or valley, ensuring they are familiar with local needs and dynamics.
- The Lotoro, or chairman, is a village elder with significant social standing and a strong influence in the community. This elder provides leadership and ensures the implementation of Dane rules. The Lotoro is chosen based on their ability to maintain harmony and enforce regulations.

Inclusivity:

Nomination or selection is open to any socially active individual in the village, creating a structure that is representative of the broader community.

Mandate Duration:

The committee serves for the duration of the Dane protection period, which is typically 5 to 10 years. Members may continue in their roles or be reselected by consensus for successive terms, depending on their performance and the community's trust.

This practice, still active in areas like the Kalash Valley, represents a deep-seated belief in the harmony between humans and nature, a balance that is carefully maintained through these indigenous practices.

3. Phazali System: Eco-Friendly Grazing Management

Shepherd is called Pazhal in local language, The Phazali system is another traditional approach to grazing management, reflecting the critical role of livestock in the mountain communities of the Hindu Kush. Livestock, including sheep, goats, cows, yaks, horses, and donkeys, are essential for nutrition, agricultural work, and transportation.

Under the Phazali system, a community member with extensive knowledge of the rangelands and livestock is hired to manage grazing. This individual, known as a Phazal, is compensated in cash or commodities such as flour, wheat, salt, sugar, soap, and shoes. The Phazal is responsible for leading the livestock to different grazing areas, ensuring their safety from predators, and protecting the predators as well. The Phazal sings traditional songs while grazing, which is believed to keep predators like snow leopards and wolves at bay, thus preventing human-wildlife conflicts. This system not only preserves livestock but also supports the delicate ecological balance of the region.

4. Saq System: Equitable Resource Distribution

The Saq system is a traditional method of regulating the use of forests and rangelands to prevent overexploitation and ensure equitable resource distribution among community members. The Saq system is typically imposed by village elders, who appoint a "Ann Wall" or watcher to oversee the protected area and enforce the rules.

There are three types of Saq:

- Total Ban: Certain fragile areas are completely protected from any type of use.

Selective Ban: Specific plant species are protected for fuelwood purposes, with collection allowed only during a designated period, typically in December.

- Grazing Ban: Grazing in specific areas is prohibited for a set period to allow for natural regeneration.

When the ban is lifted, a community gathering known as "Saqo bacha rik" is held to decide how long the area will remain open and the amount of resources that can be collected. The Ann Wall, who is not paid but may receive additional benefits from the protected area, is empowered to impose penalties on violators.

6. Hujat System: Community-Based Forest Protection

The Hujat system is a grassroots initiative where communities come together to protect their forests from illegal logging and exploitation. Each village forms a Hujat committee, which is empowered to enforce rules, impose fines on violators, and, in extreme cases, recommend social boycotts for habitual offenders. This approach has been incredibly effective in preserving forests and ensuring their sustainability for future generations. The fear of fines and social consequences discourages people from cutting down trees, helping to maintain the ecological balance and prevent disasters like flash floods.

"Our community's commitment to the Hujat system has kept the oak forest above our village intact—no trees have been cut," shared Mr. Arshafuddin, a member of the Hujat committee. "In contrast, the neighboring village, where no such system exists, has seen their forest degraded, leading to frequent flash floods."

Key Roles in the Hujat Committee

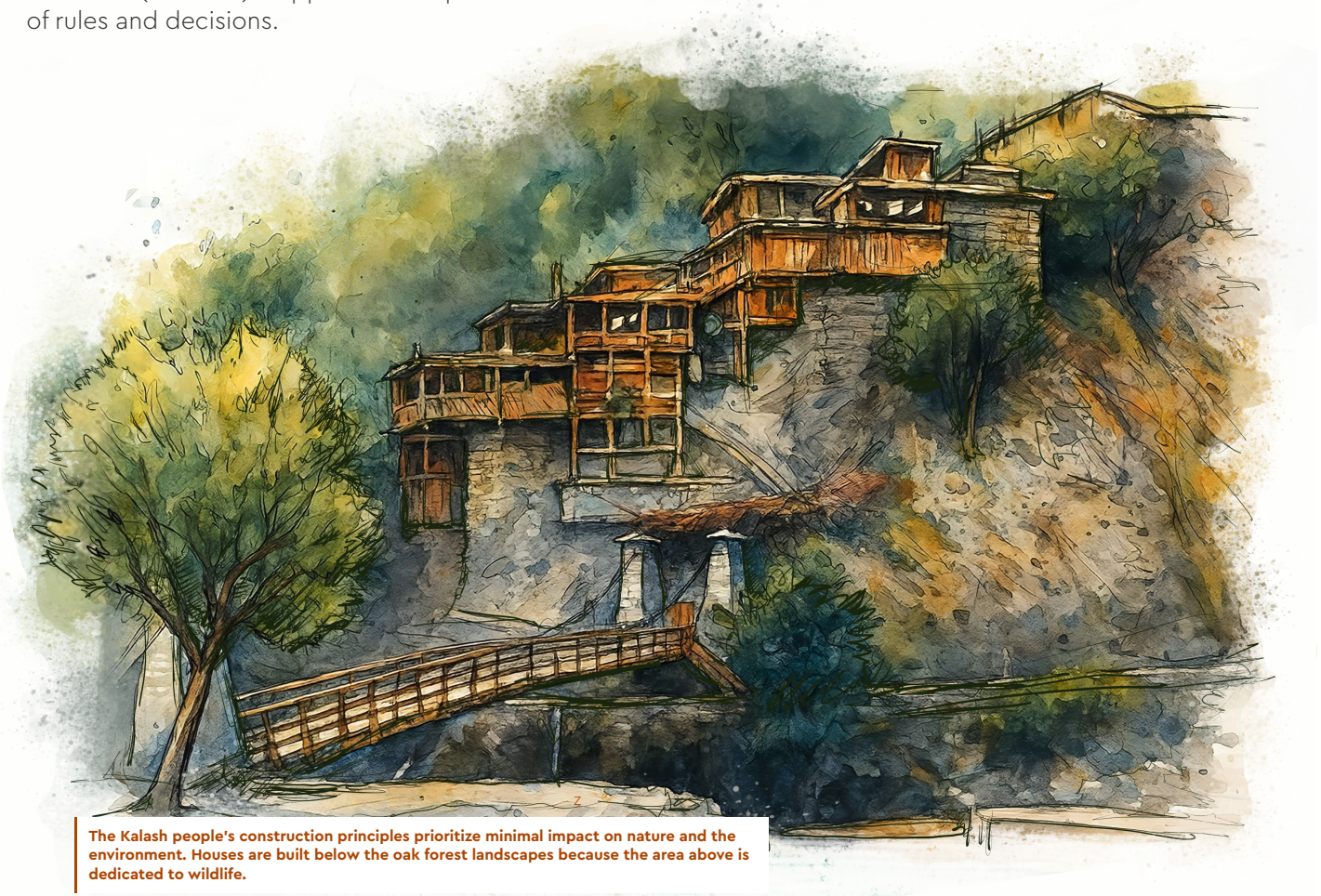
- Chairman: Leads the committee, oversees its activities, and ensures that rules are enforced.

- Mambar (Member): Supports the implementation of rules and decisions.

- Muwazeem: Handles fines, ensuring they are collected transparently, whether in cash or in kind, such as goats, axes, or other items.

- Mambaran (Patrollers): Regularly patrol the forest, monitor activities, and report any violations.

The committee meets regularly to discuss forest health, address community concerns, and adjust policies as needed. Their governance structure, based on transparency and collective decision-making, builds trust within the community and ensures everyone plays a role in protecting these critical resources.



The Kalash people's construction principles prioritize minimal impact on nature and the environment. Houses are built below the oak forest landscapes because the area above is dedicated to wildlife.

Traditional Kalash houses.

7. Golwali System

Golwali, which translates to "Range Watch," was a crucial part of managing range resources like timber and wildlife. This was all about the community working together to look after what belonged to everyone—the trees, game animals, and other natural resources. Traditionally, a tribe or a group of tribes would be responsible for these range resources, considering them as collective assets.

The main owners of these resources were known as Miraskhor. Others, referred to as Dastoor-Khor, had limited rights to use things like fodder and firewood.

The community had a built-in system for making sure the range resources were used wisely. This is where Golwali came in. Unlike other management tools like Mirzhui or Phazhali, This is a traditional rangeland management and grazing system where one person, known as the *pazali*, takes responsibility for grazing all the livestock in the village pastures. In return, livestock owners provide the pazali with payment in cash and in-kind support, such as sugar, clothes, flour, and other food items. The pazali is responsible for ensuring the sustainable use of rangelands, including avoiding overgrazing and refraining from

cutting trees in the pastures. which often relied on the efforts of individuals, Golwali was about group effort. A selected group of people was responsible for keeping an eye on the range and reporting any rule violations back to the community. Under this participatory management system, only a few families or members of certain tribes were allowed to hunt during specific months of the year. Similarly, not just anyone in the community could cut timber from the common forests; this was a privilege reserved for certain tribes and families. The Golwali system was there to ensure that the community stayed vigilant and that no one broke the rules, keeping everything in balance.

These practices have not only helped preserve the landscape's biodiversity but have also strengthened the social fabric of the communities, ensuring that conservation efforts are sustainable and inclusive.

Conclusion

The indigenous conservation practices in the Hindukush region of Chitral, Pakistan, represent a profound and sustainable way of interacting with the environment. These practices, which have evolved over generations, reflect a deep understanding of the delicate balance between human needs and the health of the landscape. From the Sotsiri system of collective grazing to the Hujat system of forest protection, each tradition is rooted in a strong sense of community, shared responsibility, and respect for nature. These practices have not only helped preserve the landscape's biodiversity but have also strengthened the social fabric of the communities, ensuring that conservation efforts are sustainable and inclusive.

As the world faces increasing environmental challenges, the wisdom embedded in these indigenous Conservation practices offers valuable lessons. They remind us that conservation is not merely a technical or scientific endeavor but a way of life that requires a deep connection to the land and a commitment to preserving it for future generations. The people of Chitral do not view themselves as separate from nature but as an integral part of it. This perspective is at the heart of their conservation efforts and provides a blueprint for sustainable living that can inspire others.

Suggestions and Recommendations

1. Documentation and Dissemination

- The indigenous conservation practices of Hindukush region Chitral Pakistan should be systematically documented, not only for preservation but also to serve as a model for other regions facing similar environmental challenges. Workshops, publications, and digital platforms can be used to share this knowledge with broader audiences, including policymakers, conservationists, and educators.

2. Integration with Modern Conservation Strategies:

- Efforts should be made to integrate these traditional practices with modern conservation

strategies. By combining the strengths of both approaches, a more holistic and effective conservation model can be developed. For instance, the Sotsiri system of grazing management could be complemented with scientific monitoring of rangeland health, enhancing both traditional wisdom and contemporary science.

3. Support for Indigenous Communities:

The government and non-governmental organizations should provide support to indigenous communities in Chitral to help sustain and enhance their conservation practices. This could include financial assistance, technical support, and capacity-building initiatives aimed at empowering these communities to continue their stewardship of the environment.

4. Promotion of Community-Based Conservation:

- The success of the community-driven conservation practices in Hindukush region Chitral highlights the importance of involving local communities in environmental management. Policies and programs that promote community-based conservation should be prioritized, recognizing that local knowledge and participation are key to long-term sustainability.

5. Cultural Preservation:

- The cultural aspects of these conservation practices, such as the rituals associated with hunting and resource management, should be preserved as part of the region's intangible heritage. This can be achieved through cultural programs, festivals, and educational initiatives that celebrate and sustain these traditions.

A man carrying fuelwood from the forest in Kalash Valley

6. Climate Change Adaptation:

- The practices in Chitral offer valuable insights into how communities can adapt to changing environmental conditions. These practices should be studied and potentially adapted to help other regions develop resilient strategies in the face of climate change. For example, the Dane system of assisted natural regeneration could be applied in areas suffering from deforestation and land degradation.

7. Policy Advocacy:

- Advocacy efforts should be made to influence regional and national policies to recognize and support indigenous conservation practices. This could involve working with local leaders, NGOs, and government agencies to ensure that these practices are protected and promoted as part of Pakistan's broader environmental conservation strategy.

By embracing and supporting the indigenous conservation practices of Hindukush region Chitral, we not only protect a unique cultural and ecological heritage but also gain valuable insights into sustainable living that can guide us in our efforts to address the environmental challenges of the 21st century

Further explorations

Voices of the Hindu Kush:
https://evo.re/rd10701

Towards an Access and Benefit Sharing Framework Agreement of the Hindu Kush-Himalayan Region:
https://evo.re/rd10702

Dennis Tabaro

Environmental activist, agroecologist

Custodians of the Sacred Natural Sites of the Bagungu community blessing the seeds after harvest.

Indigenous Biocultures and Rights of Nature in Uganda

Interview by Imke Horstmannshoff (IH)

The journey to protect the Rights of Nature is not an isolated, conventional work, by either government or civil society. It is a commitment, a calling, a dedicated decolonising process. This kind of awareness is yet to arise and it takes resources.

What is your own and AFRICE' vision of Rights of Nature?

Rights of Nature are inextricably connected with human rights. As humans, it is the harmony with Nature, being part of it and inextricably connected with it, that enables our enjoyment of our rights; including the right to enjoy, access and utilize the gifts of Nature if – and only if – we recognize respect and protect the Rights of Nature. Our vision of Rights of Nature at AFRICE, therefore, is that of communities living in harmony with Nature in order to attain their rights.

This vision started do develop in early 2013 when I started a journey to indigenous communities, with the aim to discuss and understand their views and bio cultures. Rights of Nature, i.e. rights to evolve, co-create and regenerate, are manifested in the way animals, birds, plants, insects, air, soil, water and all life systems therein are allowed to enjoy their existence, prosperity, interrelationship and co-existence. These rights are fully realized and respected in those areas called 'Sacred Natural Sites'[1] (SNS) or 'Mpuluma', where Nature is valued and protected by indigenous communities.

Who are the people you met?

They are the Bagungu, Banyabutumbi, BaSsese and Batwa indigenous communities, living along the great lakes of Mwitanzige (Albert), Rweeru (Edward) Nalubaale (Victoria) and Bwindi impenetrable forest, in Uganda. Regular and deeper dialogue with these communities, especially with the Bagungu, led me to learn about their traditional cultures and how they are related and interconnected with Nature (bioculture) and the transcendent (spirituality). The Ugandan experience and that of other indigenous communities around the world, save for the influence of colonial powers and current footprints, has proven our assertion that when communities exercise their rights to fulfill this relationship, Rights of Nature are protected.

How did you work together with them for the implementation of RoN in Uganda?

AFRICE has facilitated the Bagungu process of reviving and strengthening their custodianship of SNS as a way to protect their bioculture and consequently Rights of Nature. In doing so, we contributed to the recognition of SNS, as well as to the drafting of the Ugandan Rights of Nature law.

With support from the Gaia Foundation[2] (UK), AFRICE mobilized and worked closely with the Bagungu custodians of SNS (locally called 'Balamansi') to pursue a process of reviving their customary governance systems. This took some years as AFRICE had to identify the true custodians and to gain their trust – they had been ridiculed, persecuted and castigated as 'satanic' by Christian missionaries, colonizers and other groups for a long time. After some exploration, one of the custodians, Kagole Margret, boldly agreed with a few others to work with AFRICE (still not willing to be publicly identified as custodians at the time, for fear of reaction from the community).

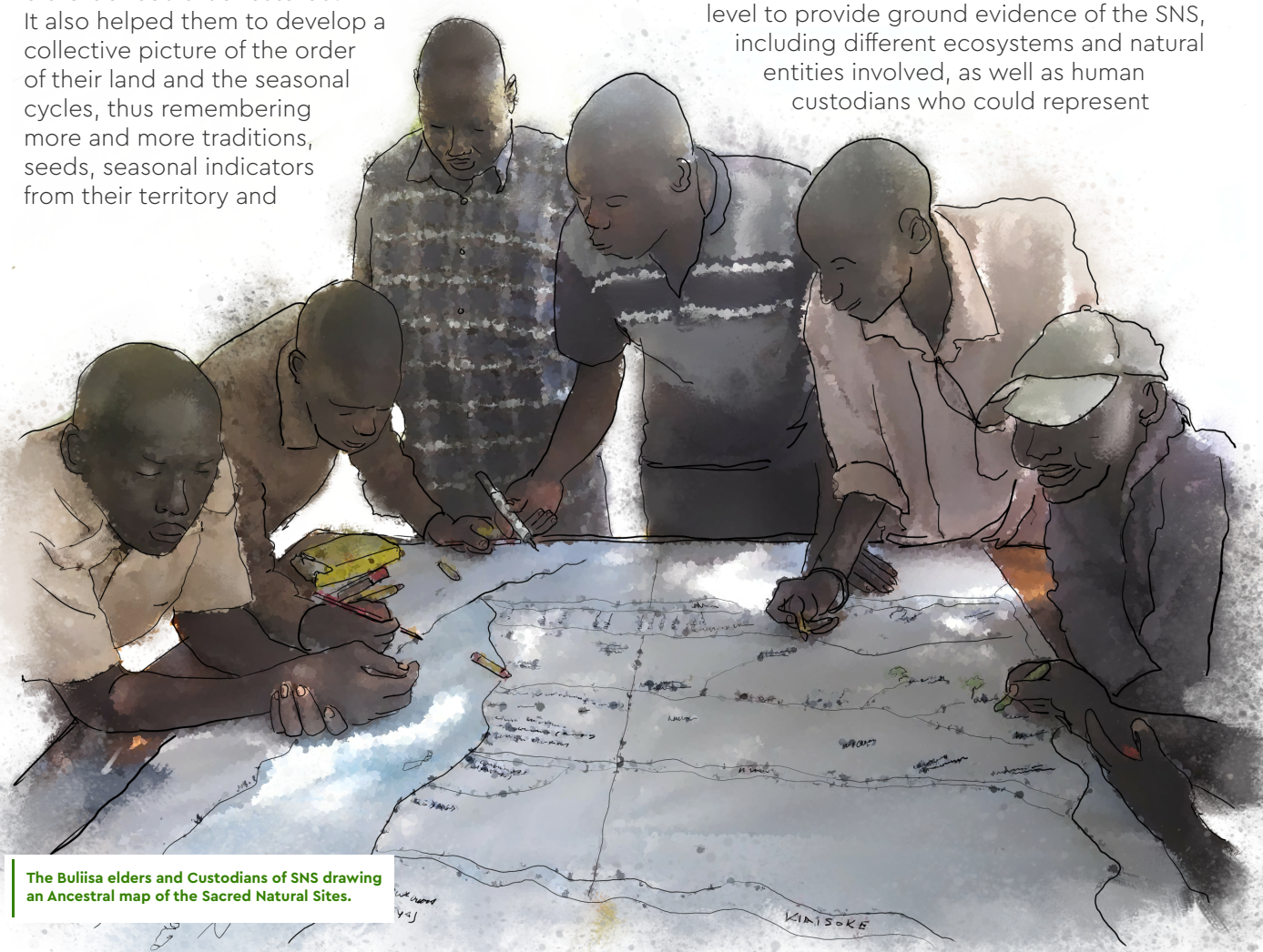
Later, in 2015, Kagole was supported by Gaia Foundation and the African Biodiversity Network[3] to attend a gathering of African custodians of SNS in Ethiopia. It was at this meeting where the custodians made a call to the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights[4] (ACHPR), urging for recognition of SNS and their custodian communities in Africa. In 2017, this call was launched in Uganda by the then Chairperson of the Uganda Human Rights Commission, late Medd Kaggwa. Upon its receipt, the African Commission, on its 60th Session in Niger, crafted and passed the 'Resolution recognising Sacred Natural Sites and Territories'[5]; now known as ACHPR Resolution 372.

Taking this inspiration from custodians' successes home, Kagole and the few other custodians she had gathered were motivated to be bolder. Their custodian dialogues grew from a small group of 6 to a gathering of 20 custodians and clan leaders from 10 clans, meeting every month during 2017. They discussed ways to re-weave the basket of the Bagungu traditional culture, strengthening their ritual performances around their SNS and territories and reviving their traditional seed diversity needed for the rituals in the SNS. These rituals represent the only way sacred sites are being kept potent and powerful. They are performed by using indigenous seeds (both crop and animal seeds). The emphasis here was to encourage custodians to perform such rituals in their respee sites.

In 2017, the custodians launched their first eco-cultural mapping processes. Led by older custodians and clan heads, they drew the ancestral map of the past, a map of the current showing what was happening now, and a map of their desired future. The women custodians of seed diversity also developed the Ancestral Calendar of the past, the present and future. This mapping and calendar process showed them how much they had lost over the years and helped them to plan on how the old order could be restored.
It also helped them to develop a collective picture of the order of their land and the seasonal cycles, thus remembering more and more traditions, seeds, seasonal indicators from their territory and customary laws as they drew and studied the maps together. In the same year, 2019 Uganda passed the law on Rights of Nature[6].

How did this law come about, and what does it entail?

This law, which is the first of its kind in Uganda and Africa, was spearheaded by a group of lawyers, the Advocates for Natural Resources and Development (ANARDE) at the parliamentary level. In the meantime, AFRICE was working at the community level to provide ground evidence of the SNS, including different ecosystems and natural entities involved, as well as human custodians who could represent



The Buliisa elders and Custodians of SNS drawing an Ancestral map of the Sacred Natural Sites.

Consultations of stakeholders in Butyaba sub county on the formulation of the draft bill.

Nature in courts of law. The passing of this law gave more momentum to our work on the ground. It was a confirmation and conviction to the communities that their rights were being recognized.
The law enabled custodians to regulate access to different areas, such as – in the case of the Bagungu – fishing in ItakaMwitanzige (Lake Albert), in order to respect the life cycle of the Lake and the fish. When these rules are followed, there is enough for everyone who depends on the Lake, including other-than-human species. Only when they are respected, would sanity come back to the Lake and those dependent on it – including its traditional name (Mwitanzige). Meanwhile, women elders, who hold the seed knowledge, have organized to revive this knowledge of identifying, growing and storing indigenous seed varieties for further multiplying and sharing. Like in other indigenous communities, for the Bagungu, a seed is endorsed with a cultural meaning and thus forms part of a deep connection with Nature: Custodians of SNS use indigenous seeds to perform rituals and other traditional ceremonies for food, social and many cultural functions.

What are the legal mechanisms to enforce these customary laws?

These customary laws have since been documented and presented to the Buliisa District Council, which issued a resolution for recognizing them as laws for protecting the SNS in Buliisa. However, this resolution was not legally binding to guarantee proper protection of SNS and the custodians, and we agreed that there was a need for making a bill for a protection ordinance of SNS and ecosystems.

In 2021, after passing the draft bill to the council and its committees and after holding district-wide multi-stakeholder consultations, Buliisa made yet another historic step by passing a bill for a protection ordinance of SNS and ecosystems. The bill was presented to the office of the Attorney General, the 1st Parliamentary Council of the Uganda Parliament, for approval.

We are now in the process of clearly specifying different customary laws for protecting Nature (the lakes, rivers, forests, animals, insects) as stipulated by the ordinance bill. Meanwhile, the Bagungu have developed clan structures (including custodians and women elders), for restorative justice where violators of Rights of Nature are punished and made to restore, atone or compensate for the violation of nature's rights.

The Rights of Nature enacted by the Ugandan Parliament is yet to be implemented, but there is no specific legal framework to do this. We are working with other groups of civil society to come up with a draft legal framework and policy proposals to present to the government for consideration.

Where do you see challenges for the implementation of Rights of Nature in Uganda?

The journey to protect the Rights of Nature is not an isolated, conventional work, by either government or civil society. It is a commitment, a calling, a dedicated decolonising process. This kind of awareness is yet to arise and it takes resources. In the process of colonization, British colonizers introduced foreign religion and education, which castigated and satanized the traditional cultures and weakened their biocultural systems responsible for their close connection with Nature.

"Nabunu twijwiire obunaku,hakuba ensi yabugungu erimukucura. Tukaba tutikarolagaga endwiire nkazinu,okubura encu mu itaka Mwitanzige."

states Aron Kiiza, 85 years, a chief custodian of one of the SNS:

"Even now we are sorrowful, because the land of Bugungu is all mourning. We had never seen diseases like these and lack of fish in Lake Mwitanzige."

While the Parliament has passed the National Environmental Act, the responsible government minister is yet to provide regulations for its implementation. Given this background, however, there is a need for a lot of sensitization and engagement by the communities and civil society. To be very honest, there are just a few non-governmental organizations and communities like the Bagungu, who follow this approach of promoting customary governance systems for the realization of Rights of Nature.

Related to the above, colonization in Africa and elsewhere has taken its toll on people's rights to their culture, including bioculture. We must decolonize conservation policies, the legal and religious systems that are now leading to biodiversity loss, food loss and loss of entire ecosystems. It starts with appreciating the fact that humans are not superior to Nature; that where humans get their rights is where Nature gets its rights.

Moreover, protection of SNS is a systems approach: It must be seen as an integral part of preserving fauna and flora; conservation of animal habitats and biodiversity, indigenous food systems and regenerative food and ecosystems for sustainable living; a process that translates into recognition of Rights of Nature. However, SNS in Uganda are yet to be understood by a larger majority of the people, most of whom are not familiar with the concept. Many people know SNS only as places for pagans and witchcraft, which are not worthwhile protecting.
The industrial farming systems, coupled with hybrid seeds and genetically engineered seeds monocultures, chemical pests and fertilizers, is destroying soils and all biodiversity. This poses a big threat and thus a big challenge to (and need for) implementation of Rights of Nature. The traditional farming systems, embedded in agroecology, were very conscious about all forms of Nature and the relationship between Nature and farming, fishing, hunting and food gathering. A holistic food and ecological governance approach will be an effective way to realize Rights of Nature.

As Gafabusa John, the Chairman of the Association of Custodians of Sacred Natural Sites in Buliisa, states:

"We hope the Government will quickly approve the ordinance on protection of our Sacred Natural Sites so that our rivers, forests and entire land scape with animals can be protected. We need also to have this law in place so that we can have the strength and courage to train our sons before we leave this world."

Notes

[1] See: https://www.iucn.org/content/sacred-natural-sites-conserving-nature-and-culture

[2] See: https://gaiafoundation.org/

[3] See: https://africanbiodiversity.org/

[4] See: https://gaiafoundation.org/post-library/calltoafricancommission/

[5] See: https://achpr.au.int/index.php/en/adopted-resolutions/372-resolution-protection-sacred-natural-sites-and-territories-achprres

[6] See: http://files.harmonywithnatureun.org/uploads/upload989.pdf

Custodians of SNS/Balamansi offer an early morning prayer at the site of a community dialogue process.

Further explorations

Baliisa District Council – Resolution recognising the Customary Law of the Bagungu Custodian clans:
https://evo.re/rd10801

Advocates for Natural Resources and Development (ANARDE):
https://evo.re/rd10802

Uganda, Reweaving the Basket of Life:
https://evo.re/rd10803

Q&A: African Commission's new Resolution (372) on Sacred Natural Sites and Territories:
https://evo.re/rd10804

Observations on the State of Indigenous Human Rights in Uganda:
https://evo.re/rd10805

EPILOGUE

Earthy Governance: What would decision-making look like if all life mattered?

Shrishtee Bajpai & Ashish Kothari

In April 2013, the Supreme Court of India delivered a historic judgement recognising the cultural, religious, and spiritual rights of the Dongria Kondh Adivasis[1] on the Niyamgiri hills residing in the state of Odisha in eastern India. The community fighting against bauxite mining in their sacred landscape had articulated that our way of life allied to the 'sacred law', as prescribed by ***Niyamraja*** (King of Law) disallows unsustainable exploitation of the forest and the land[2]. The Niyamgiri judgement is one of those rare moments, where the modern state and law came close to recognising the interconnectedness that communities have with the more-than-human world.

Indigenous and other nature-dependent communities in India as well as across the world, have often articulated, as part their resistance to the imposition of external domination, an inseparability of nature from humans. To cite a few more voices:

"For you the river might be megawatts of electricity but for us, the river is our mother", said Adivasis of 300 villages gathered on the banks of the Indravati river, in Maharashtra, to protest plans for two mega-hydropower dams in the 1980s (both were abandoned);

"Nature is our God. Adivasis do not make cement idols or statues. The leaves, trees, animals, rivers and the spirits in the forest are our gods", said Samaru Kallu, an elder from Gond adivasi community from Korchi (Gadchiroli), Maharashtra while describing their struggles to take collective control over the forests and resist mining in their territory.

"the river has a right to sing, play and feed", opined a young girl living on the banks of river Indus in Ladakh, the trans-himalayan landscape of India.

"Every territory is occupied by guardian spirits who are protectors and keepers of these landscapes. We enter these landscapes only

after we have offered our prayers and respects", explained Hishey Lachungpa from the Bhutia community of Sikkim.

We can list many more such quotes from across India, of communities articulating diverse ways of worlding where existence, and worldviews are in close connection with, or rather ***within***, nature. And the same for Indigenous peoples and other traditional communities in other parts of the world. For instance, the late Ladonna Brave Bull, one of the earliest to protest the proposed Dakota pipeline that was going through sacred Sioux territory in North America, told us in a conversation in Portugal at a 'Defend the Sacred' conference in 2019: *"when we cross the river, we pray to her; we have a connection with her, she is a living being and water is the first medicine in the world."* In the Ecuadorian Amazon, Manari Ushugua, a shaman of the Sapara Indigenous nation told one of us, while describing why they are resisting oil exploration in their territory: *"all the plants, animals, rocks, rivers, have spirits, just like us. Our daily lives are led in conversation with these spirits; they and the spirits of our ancestors speak to us in our dreams. This landscape is filled with life, how can we allow it to be destroyed?"*[3]

These worldviews challenge the fundamental tenets of a dominant strand of Western thinking —that humans alone are possessed of rights and all the rest of the living world exists for human use. These communities living and thriving along the ecosystems have revered the rivers, mountains, forests, lands, and seas, and believed that they have agency of their own. In that sense, they have lived with the rhythms and moods of the rest of nature by grounding themselves in intuitive and embodied knowledge of the inhabited ecosystems.

This is not to say that all such communities and peoples have always lived in harmony with the rest of nature (or with each other). Seen from various justice and rights perspectives, traditional systems have their own internal contradictions (to which we will return briefly below), and we do not intend to submerge these. Our point here is to focus on the ways in which they have conducted their affairs within nature, and what this can teach the rest of us who have veered very far from such ways.

"When we enter the forests, we seek permission from deities, spirits and other beings because we are entering their homes" says Namgyal Lepcha, an elder from Lepcha community in Dzongu, Sikkim (north-east India) for whom nature is not mere rocks to be mined for profits but rather an entity with agency. From a reductionist, modernist perspective, these articulations appear as nonsense, because the State and other forms of dominant governance institutions work on the logic that humans are separate from rivers, mountains and forests, and

"Traditional and customary governance systems are important to be understood, articulated, highlighted, re-asserted and learnt from, as counters or balancing forces to the modern governance discourse and institutions"

individuals from the community. Whereas, in many of these struggles of territorial defence that is primarily being challenged that humans are not atomised individual selves, nor are they separate from more-than-human community. *"Why do we oppose this mining project, you ask. Let us assume that we Adivasis will have to leave the forest if the mining company displaces us. But our forest spirits will have no other place to go. Where will so many birds, animals and other species that live in these forests go?"* says Samaru Kallo, a Gond Adivasi elder from Korchi in Maharashtra, where the community has been resisting mining projects for the last two decades. Prakash Bhoir, a Warli Adivasi engaged in a struggle to protect his community's forested habitat in Mumbai from a proposed metro project, told the gathering on 'Indigenous and Traditional Community Worldviews' mentioned above: *"if we are displaced, we may well find another home, but where will the leopard go?"*

In the words of Samaru Kallo and Prakash Bhoir, it is clear that the sense of community is not restricted to merely humans but extends to more than humans including the spirits, beings, animals and forests, and mountains. According to Izamsai Katengey, another Gond adivasi (indigenous) activist from Korchi: *"Changla Jeevan Jage Mayan Saathi Sapalorukoon Apu Apuna Jababdarita Jaaniv Ata Pahe (to achieve well-being everyone needs to know what their responsibility is)"*. In Gondi, there is no word or expression for entitlements or rights, rather their language lays emphasis on the duties and responsibilities. The Gonds along with many indigenous communities in India believe that their sense of responsibility expands to all humans as well as more-than-humans. As an aside, it is interesting that when Mahatma Gandhi was asked his views on human rights, he said that rights come from responsibilities and duties, not the other way round.

Among the communities in Trans-Himalayan landscape of Spiti in Himachal Pradesh, guardian spirits have a ubiquitous presence. One of the oldest villages in the valley, Kibber and its neighbouring areas (Kibber, Hikkim, Langza, Dimul villages) come under the *guardian spirit*, Chukyong Ronglong. Kibber has complex traditional decision making processes rooted in community assemblies, and collective leadership. If people in the village are unable to take any decision then they consult Ronglong as he has records of their ancestors and decisions. *"A few years ago, the guardian spirit warned us that excessive trekking on Kanamo peak is resulting in its degradation. We immediately followed his instructions and stopped trekking on that sacred mountain"* said Tanzin Thinley, a resident and conservationist from Kibber.

In these "lifescapes", people's lives are part of a cosmic order. Large swathes of desert and grasslands are not empty lands but rather protected through deities and need to be cared for and tended to, by embedding all human activity within nature. Deities are consulted for crop cultivation, sowing, ploughing, snowfall, and rainfall, among other such land-based practices. In the adjoining landscape of Ladakh, similar to Spiti, *lhas* and *lhus* (spirits in the village) are a ubiquitous presence, protecting the landscapes and humans living in them and sustaining the cosmic order.

In many of these examples, we see the assertion of people's ideas of what makes meaningful lives instead of being told how to live their lives by the ones allegedly 'more equal' than them (from within or outside their communities). People's lives are bound to and understood through being in a deep relationship with nature. Opposite to that, though, we see the hegemonic 'development' discourse and the 'nation-state' model, that despite India's federal and decentralised democratic system still retains strong political, administrative, and economic centralisation in its spirit and functioning. The attempts at political and administrative 'decentralisation' (importantly, through the 73rd and 74th Constitutional amendments[4] or provisions like Articles 370 and 371, providing powers to institutions of self-governance at village, district, and urban levels), have provided some counter trends to this, but they mostly remained half-hearted in both concept and implementation except where a locally empowered community has asserted itself[5].

Meanwhile, processes of land grabbing and environmental devastation in the name of 'development' continue apace, the results of which are evident in independent reports of ecological collapse ,including the climate crisis. The problem with such 'development' is given a cosmological explanation by Smanla Tundup, ex-Goba (traditional headman) of Saspotsey village in Ladakh:

Forest dieties in Kumkot village in central India
Source: Shrishtee Bajpai

"Temperatures are rising, snowfall is much less and all you can see are bulldozers digging up the earth everywhere. We have disturbed the spirits of the land, of mountains, of snow. If the spirits of nature are not happy, how can we humans be?" These words eloquently point to the perils of top-down, human-centred decision-making[6]. Even when dominant regimes acknowledge the need to integrate ecological issues into economic planning, they do so through reductionist tools like 'environment impact assessment', which can never understand much less integrate the cultural-spiritual relations of communities with the earth.

Traditional and customary governance systems are important to be understood, articulated, highlighted, re-asserted and learnt from, as counters or balancing forces to the modern governance discourse and institutions. This is not to hide the fact that traditional systems have often also embedded discriminations and inequities, such as those relating to gender, caste, ethnicity, ability, and age; nor is it to deny that modern institutions of democracy have their own benefits, including the possibility of going beyond traditional power elites, or creating spaces of meaningful participation for marginalised sections. But communities also find such modern institutions problematic in many ways, such as the introduction of divisive party politics, and strengthening existing elites or creating new ones. Crucially, much of modern governance has looked at people's ways of organising lives and their relationship within nature as 'backward'. Their systems of consulting spirits of the forests and land to grant or deny permission for mining and damming are simply labelled as superstition. However, increasingly it is also being recognised that these worldviews have been based on certain ecological understanding of the landscapes and have been able to protect much of the remaining biodiversity of this planet. So, even from a 'rational' point of view of sustainability, they make sense.

What is striking is that there has been limited work to understand the dynamics of traditional systems in practice while they interact with the newer, statutory systems of governance, and what kinds of conflicts and complementarities emerge between traditional norms and modern constitutional values[^7]. Hence, the real challenge is to truly understand these systems, their evolving nature to suit contemporary societies, their interface with modern governance institutions, and how overall governance can be strengthened for the objectives of justice and ecological living. In our study of the Goba system of Ladakh[8], in which a village elder is chosen for a complex set of cultural, political, social and economic tasks, we found that despite the establishment of the Constitutionally mandated ***panchayat*** (village council) system, in most villages the Goba system still held sway. This included decision-making that integrated spiritual relations with the land and water, something completely outside the domain or mandate of the *panchayats*.

The stark evidence of ecological and social collapse emerging across the world is leading to slow but visible paradigm shifts in the global North too. New frameworks such as Earth

Jurisprudence[9], Rights of Nature[10], More-than-Human Rights[11], Wild Law[12] are signalling a shift from extractive mindsets to where such societies recognise that Nature is, and should be, the source of (or at least integrated into) human laws, ethics and how we govern ourselves. However, many of these are still embedded in formal western legal frameworks. They do not meaningfully encompass the worldviews that we mention above, except to some extent where they emanate from or centrally involve Indigenous peoples located in such regions, such as for instance the recent recognition of the rights of the Wanganui River in New Zealand, born out of a century of struggle by the Maori Indigenous people. Most of these 'rights of nature' initiatives fail to incorporate some crucial elements of these worldviews, such as radical autonomy to sustain their territories, exercise their sovereignty, and communalise economies, as also the recognition of the agency of nature. They also do not always question the roots of the crises, such as colonial and capitalist relations, or the domination of nation-states and centralised governments. Nation-state building has been supported by an ideology asserting that capitalist and extractive modernity is the only way to organise lives, that a centralised state is the only way to reach 'welfare' to the 'masses', and that this justifies taking over territories of Indigenous peoples and local communities for national goals like 'development' and 'security'. Even where it has furthered democracy in its liberal, electoral form, it has not been able to integrate biocentric or ecocentric ways of governance and decision-making, partly because such democracy itself is shallow, with inadequate spaces for grounded self-determination by communities. In many cases it has mirrored colonisation by one state over another, through internal colonisation of territories within a nation-state[13].

Hence, whether as movements for ecological conservation in its material, 'rational' form, or as campaigns for Rights of Nature, Earth Jurisprudence and/or More-than-Human rights, we must also ask for basic questions of community autonomy and sovereignty, questioning the hegemony of nation-states as well as institutions of corporate and other centralised power. Else, there is a chance that we might fall into the trap of 'feel-good' nature paradigms such as 'half-earth', or '30X30' or 'nature-based solutions', or climate paradigms like 'net-zero', and be co-opted by corporations who will find a seat for nature in their board while continuing to mine sacred landscapes across the global South.

Langur mother and baby in Rajasthan, India

Such 'solutions' to ecological crises, including those embedded in many Green New Deals, continue to perpetuate relations of inequity[14] and exploitation between the global North and the global South, requiring 'sacrifice zones' to feed the consumption patterns of the former.

For those of us trapped in or seduced by atomised modernity in our urban cocoons, individuals living in the global North, or in other ways alienated from the rest of nature, the crucial question is: how do we integrate into our lives those elements of reverence, respect, reciprocity and interdependence with the rest of nature that many of the traditional systems mentioned above embody? How can we rekindle the balance between human needs and aspirations, and the rights of other species to thrive? How do we find seats for other species in our decision-making spaces? How do we move beyond narrow legalistic notions of 'rights of nature' to more holistic worldviews of respect, which also require changes in how we live and love? Rather than further scrutinising traditional systems through dominant theoretical frameworks, can we understand their basic principles and bring them into interfaces that can allow for new ways of organising our systems of governance, even as we encourage their own internal changes to remove discriminatory practices? How do we move towards more 'earthy governance'? ■

Snow leopard, an elusive mountain cat in trans-himalayan landscape of India
Source: Shrishtee Bajpai

Notes

[1] Adivasis are India's Indigenous peoples

[2] "The Niyamgiri Story". See: https://vikalpsangam.org/wp-content/uploads/migrate/Resources/niyamgiricasestudyjan2018.pdf

[3] Manari Ushugua, Sapara indigenous leader: dreamworlds & indigenous struggles in Amazon: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=koblIKl4RH8

[4] The Constitution (Seventy-third Amendment) Act, 1992. See: https://www.india.gov.in/my-government/constitution-india/amendments/constitution-india-seventy-third-amendment-act-1992

[5] Bijoy, C.R. (2021). 'Democracy in the forests: Governance as it is to be'. Law, Environment and Development Journal, 17/1:20. http://www.lead-journal.org/content/a1702.pdf

[6] "The Changpas' way of life is undergoing shocks and disruption": https://india.mongabay.com/2022/08/the-changpas-way-of-life-is-undergoing-shocks-and-disruption/

[7] Baruah, A.K. (2003). 'Tribal traditions and crises of governance in north-east India, with special reference to Meghalaya', Working Paper 22, DESTIN, London. https://www.lse.ac.uk/international-development/Assets/Documents/PDFs/csrc-working-papers-phase-one/wp22-tribal-traditions-and-crises-of-governance-in-ne-india.pdf

[8] "The Goba of Ladakh: Report": https://vikalpsangam.org/article/the-goba-of-ladakh-report/

[9] "Earth Jurisprudence: what you need to know". https://gaiafoundation.org/earth-jurisprudence/

[10] GARN's reports: https://www.garn.org/articles-and-reports/

[11] MTH programme: https://mothrights.org

[12] "Wild Law: A Manifesto for Earth Justice" by Cormac Cullinan. https://www.bloomsbury.com/in/wild-law-9780857840295/

[13] "Colonisers and colonized": https://www.meer.com/en/71068-colonisers-and-colonized

[14] "No Harm Here is Still Harm There: The Green New Deal and the Global South (I)": https://www.jamhoor.org/read/2020/5/20/no-harm-here-is-still-harm-there-looking-at-the-green-new-deal-from-the-global-south

About the Contributors

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